

# BETTER HEARING FOR ALL NATIONS

BY SERGEI KOCHKIN, PH.D.

I am pleased to introduce *Hearing Health's* special coverage of global initiatives to bring better hearing and improved lives to all people with hearing loss. As you read the next several pages, I think you will conclude that it is indeed timely and laudable to focus on international efforts in hearing health.

You will learn about new approaches on a grand scale and get a glimpse at health crises currently endangering the hearing of large numbers of the world's citizens. You will also learn about the tenacity and determination of groups and projects that serve deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals in faraway places.

As Dr. Andrew Smith of the World Health Organization informs in his piece on the emergence of a "grand alliance," adult-onset hearing loss is the second most prevalent non-fatal disability contributing to the global burden of disease. We can no longer let its victims live in silence.

Research over the last decade has presented compelling evidence of the negative social, psychological, cognitive and health effects of hearing loss. In the work force, uncorrected hearing loss often has a negative impact on overall job effectiveness, promotion and perhaps lifelong earning power.

Even a mild or moderate hearing loss without the assistance of amplification may have a serious impact on a child's ability to learn and develop speech. Congenital deaf-

ness left untreated can lead to a life where dreams and natural abilities are not fully realized. This reality is clearly described by Dr. Rajendra Desai in "Rubella Deafens India" and starkly pictured in Charles Dittmeier's Cambodian journal.

Rapid growth of the elderly population poses a unique challenge for treating hearing loss, particularly in developing countries. The U.S. Bureau of Census-International Program Center estimates that the over-65 population will grow 71 percent worldwide between 2000 and 2020. Since hearing loss is strongly associated with aging, this astronomical increase means that worldwide numbers of people needing hearing aids and related services will skyrocket.

Adding to the potential vastness of the problem is the current projection that the largest increases in the senior population will be in developing nations where access to hearing aids and related services is limited at best. Examples include Africa at 79 percent, Central America at 106 percent and the Middle East at 127 percent growth rates in the senior age group in contrast to Western Europe at 32 percent and North America at 57 percent.

Although few would disagree that uncorrected hearing loss is a serious issue, in less-developed nations it is perhaps tempting to minimize the importance of its treatment. Individuals and families have other serious issues, including securing food, shelter, cloth-



**Little girl in Madagascar hears tones during screening.** PHOTO BY ANDREW SMITH

ing, employment, adequate medical attention, disease prevention and escape from the ravages of war. All the same, Dr. Darlene Lubbe's report of AIDS-related hearing disorders helps us understand the importance of addressing hearing loss, even when juxtaposed with a deadly plague.

Problems in securing the basic necessities of life are indeed a severe burden. To the person with untreated hearing loss, these difficulties are even more devastating because the ability to communicate is impaired. Concern about the unavailability of services, funding, even adequate supplies of hearing aids and other technologies fuels many of the international organizations profiled in the pages ahead. Ultimately, their message is that by joining forces today to foster creative solutions, we can find ways to successfully treat many more people with hearing loss in more parts of the world than ever dreamed possible.

It is a message I strongly endorse. Let us together bring the gift of hearing to all nations. ■

**Sergei Kochkin, Ph.D.**, is a widely acclaimed researcher on hearing issues and executive director of the Better Hearing Institute (BHI). He authored *MarkeTrak: The US Hearing Instrument Market* and countless articles and makes frequent speaking appearances. Readers can contact him through the BHI website, [www.betterhearing.org](http://www.betterhearing.org).