



Who's who in the Tinnitus Clinic

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Various health care professionals may be involved in the management of tinnitus. There is much overlap of responsibility and no clear demarcation of duties. Therefore roles that are undertaken by a doctor in one region may be performed by an audiologist, audiological scientist or hearing therapist in another region.

Doctors

Various doctors may be involved in the management of tinnitus, including:

- GPs
- ENT (Ear, Nose and Throat) specialists, sometimes called Otologists
- Audiological physicians

All doctors undergo similar basic general medical training, comprising approximately 3 years of undergraduate training and 2½ years of clinical medical student training. It is only during this latter 2½ years that students meet patients. All doctors then do 1 year of closely supervised pre-registration house jobs before embarking on post-graduate training for their chosen niche in the profession.

GPs

Some GPs have good knowledge of tinnitus: others have little. However they all have a fundamental role in the treatment of tinnitus. To access tinnitus services in the UK a person must first get their GP to write a referral letter to the local tinnitus unit. There is no mechanism by which people can be seen in tinnitus clinics without such a referral.

ENT specialists

Doctors who have trained as ENT specialists have undertaken postgraduate training in surgery and in the UK are therefore known as Mr, Miss or Mrs rather than Dr. There is a degree of sub specialization and not every ENT specialist has an interest in tinnitus. An ENT specialist will take a medical history from the person, perform a clinical examination and arrange for any tests. He / she may then get involved in further treatment such as tinnitus retraining therapy (TRT). However, many ENT specialists will delegate such treatment to other members of the team. In the rare event of surgery being required in the management of tinnitus

this will be undertaken by an ENT specialist.

Audiological physician

Audiological physicians receive the same basic training as any other doctor and then, after a period of postgraduate training, specialize in the non surgical management of hearing, tinnitus and balance disorders. Part of the training for this specialty includes an MSc in audiological medicine. Audiological physicians are well trained in the management of tinnitus and most run dedicated tinnitus clinics. They listen to the person's symptoms, examine their ears and perform any necessary investigations. They then arrange for the most appropriate treatment such as hearing aids, sound generators, TRT and counseling. However, audiological physicians are still a rarity and are only employed in a few health districts.

Other health care professional's (HCP's)

Audiologist

Audiologists form the backbone of hospital based audiology departments. There are a variety of routes to qualification, but it is increasingly the case that an audiologist will have a relevant degree in addition to professional qualifications. Much of their time is spent performing hearing and balance tests and fitting and maintaining hearing aids. They may also fit sound generators (previously known as maskers). Some audiologists have been on tinnitus training courses and undertake TRT.

Audiological scientist

Audiological scientists start by getting a university degree, usually in a science based subject. They then go back to university to obtain a master's degree in audiology and finally get hands-on experience under a fully qualified audiological scientist. Their duties overlap to a very considerable extent with those of audiologists, though audiological scientists tend to be involved with the more sophisticated diagnostic testing of both hearing and balance disorders. Some audiological scientists specialise in children's hearing problems (paediatric audiology). Some audiological scientists have a research commitment. In some hospitals an audiological scientist is the main provider of TRT.

Hearing therapist

Hearing therapists are a relatively recent addition to the tinnitus service and as such are in short supply. Most are people who have a primary university degree or audiology qualification and have worked with the hearing impaired in some guise. They then do a 2 year diploma in hearing therapy. They have a wide remit, supporting people with hearing or balance problems as well as tinnitus. They offer help with acclimatising to hearing aids and teach lip-reading. They advise on environmental aids such as amplified telephones or infra-red links to televisions. They supply general information and advice regarding the auditory system and explain conditions such as Menieres Disease or Otosclerosis. In many units hearing

therapists are the main providers of TRT and other forms of tinnitus management.

There are long term plans to rationalise the above structure. In the future there may not be separate audiologists, audiological scientists and hearing therapists but one more widely trained professional.

Nurse specialists

In a small number of units people with a nursing background are being trained to provide a similar service to that given by

hearing therapists.

Clinical psychologists

Clinical psychologists do an initial 3 year university course followed by 2 years of supervised work in a psychology department. They then undertake a further 3 years in university to obtain a doctorate in psychology. Psychologists approach tinnitus slightly differently to other professionals and are more likely to use mainstream psychological methods rather than Tinnitus Retraining Therapy (TRT) techniques.

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