



Title	Hearing Aids in Belgium: Health Technology Assessment
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Aim

To evaluate whether and how the current procedure for providing and reimbursing hearing aids in Belgium could be improved.

Conclusions and results

The current scientific literature adds little relevant information to the policy debate on reimbursement of hearing aids. Uncertainty remains about evidence-based, effective and cost-effective best practices. Experiences in other countries with elaborate policy frameworks linking hearing loss severity to tailored hearing aid reimbursement were found to fail in their purpose. Raising current reimbursement levels is unlikely to generate genuine additional value for patients, and Belgian reimbursement levels are similar to surrounding countries. However, Belgian reimbursement criteria are relatively strict compared to surrounding countries. Relaxing those criteria could, for instance, give more people of working age access to hearing aids needed to continue productive work.

Recommendations

The recommendations are to increase transparency for patients regarding the relation between price and complexity/performance of hearing aids and to allow patients to test several hearing aids in practice, enabling them to choose the best benefit/price ratio considering their specific hearing needs. Also, it is proposed that reimbursement for the devices should be separated from the fee for fitting of the devices by audioprothesists. The aim here is to enhance transparency and favor unbiased counseling (currently the audioprothesists are paid a proportion of the device's retail price as a fee for services provided). Nationally organized public tendering for hearing aids with specific baseline characteristics is proposed as a policy option.

Methods

The project systematically reviewed efficacy and effectiveness, and reviewed cost effectiveness (RCTs and

randomized crossover study designs). Additionally, it presented an analysis of global and Belgian markets for hearing aids, an overview of international policy choices and price comparisons, and an exploration of current and future budgetary implications for several scenarios.

Further research/reviews required

Further research is needed on the real clinical benefits of specific hearing aids at different degrees of hearing impairment and the relative benefits of bilateral versus unilateral hearing aid fittings.