## The impact on our ears

**By Andrew Goodwin, outreach adviser at Deafness Research UK**

There's no doubt we're sitting on a hearing timebomb. The kind of noise damage that went out with the shutting down of heavy industry in the 1970s, is now coming back. A third of 16 to 34 year-olds listen to their MP3 player for an hour a day, while **14% listen for 28 hours a week**. Many of them listen at maximum volume.

When we tested MP3 players we found most went up to 100 decibels, 10 decibels higher than a pneumatic drill. Some went **as high as 120 decibels**. We're going to have tens of thousands of people who'll need hearing aids in their 40s and 50s rather than their 60s and 70s.

Part of the problem is that people listen to their music on public transport where there's horrendous background noise. And the ear buds that Apple and other manufacturers provide are cheap, horrible things. If you wear headphones that go over your ears it blocks out the background noise and means you don't need to have the music so loud.

When British sailors were taken prisoner by the Iranians in 2007, Able Seaman Arthur Batchelor admitted he had "cried like a baby" after his iPod was confiscated by his captors. He was branded a national embarrassment by newspapers. In the same year, a Muslim juror was discharged from a murder trial after being caught listening to her iPod under the hijab.

But the most visceral concern is that the iPod is making people anti-social. It's not just the tinny noise that leaks out of the puny ear buds but the barrier the device erects between people. Telegraph columnist Bryony Gordon says young people have grown up to be "plugged in" to their iPod, rather than relating to their surroundings.

"I wouldn't stop someone wearing those white wires to ask for directions. It's like they're putting up a big closed sign," Gordon notes.

Prof Bull's interviews with iPod users confirm this perception. Many iPod users told him they resented people interrupting their listening to talk to them.

The iPod has thus created a minefield over how to behave. When entering a shop, should the user take off their headphones to talk to a sales assistant? Should they take one out? Or leave them both on and turn the volume down?

Debrett's etiquette adviser Liz Wyse says that both of them must come out. "It's very belittling to a shop assistant if you can't be bothered to take your headphones out. And the half on, half off, look is compromised - it's like you're going to put them back in any minute."

Many people wear headphones in circumstances where they would not anyway want to be disturbed

But in a reflection of what a battlefield public space has become, she defends the iPod as a means of defence against a still worse public nuisance - the mobile phone. "An iPod is a brilliant thing on trains. Otherwise you're forced to listen to people's loud conversations on their mobile phones."

Psychologist Oliver James says the reluctance to take one's headphones out shows the "self-absorbed and atomised" state that people have got themselves into. "It's almost like madness. Will I come out of my bubble? How much of a compromise will I make to my external reality?"

But the fact is, it fits our modern desires, says Prof Bull. People have never talked much on trains - hence the famous commuters' trick of hiding behind their copy of the Daily Telegraph. The iPod is merely amplifying that trend.

"It can be lonely travelling through public space and using music warms it up," he says. The downside is that while the individual feels warmer - and has the perception of being safer despite not being able to hear an approaching assailant - the public realm becomes a less social, "chillier" space.