WHAT IS IT?
- Tinnitus is the term that describes noises in the ears and/or ‘in the head’ that have no external source. These noises are described as ringing, whistling, buzzing or humming.
- People can be affected in one or both ears, or feel that the noises are emanating from somewhere inside their head.
- Mild tinnitus is quite common but around one in 200 people will have serious tinnitus, which can damage their quality of life.

CAUSES
- Most cases result from problems in the sensorineural system, which is involved in transmitting signals from the inner ear to the brain.
- Tinnitus is more common in older people as it is associated with hearing loss.
- People who work in loud environments are at risk.
- Other possible causes of tinnitus include:
  - Otosclerosis (abnormal growth of bone in the middle ear due to otospongiosis);
  - Ménière’s disease;
  - Ear infections;
  - High doses of certain drugs, including aspirin and some antibiotics;
  - Otitis media;
  - Excess wax;
  - Acoustic neuroma;
  - Anaemia;
  - Hypothyroidism;
  - Head trauma;
  - High blood pressure;
  - Disorders of the heart and blood vessels, particularly those in the head;
  - Autoimmune disorders.

SYMPTOMS
- The main symptom is the noises people hear. Some patients find it hard to locate the exact location of these noises, which can be low, medium or high in pitch.
- There may be a single noise or many different noises.
- Noise may be present at all times or come and go intermittently.
- Symptoms affect individuals differently – some people with mild tinnitus can live quite happily with the noises, whereas others who are more badly affected may find the noises extremely irritating and stressful. This can have a detrimental effect on their quality of life.

DIAGNOSIS
- Diagnosis is usually made on the basis of symptoms.
- Some tests, including hearing and balance tests, can help to determine the diagnosis.
- An MRI scan can help determine if there are abnormalities in the inner ear.

TREATMENT
- First-line treatment is to treat any underlying condition, such as excessive wax or ear infection.
- If the person has hearing difficulties as well as tinnitus a hearing aid can help by blocking out the noise of tinnitus.
- There are devices that look like hearing aids but work by producing sounds to mask the noise of the tinnitus.
- No one drug has yet been designed specifically to treat tinnitus. Certain types of anxiolytics, antidepressants, antihistamines and anticonvulsants have been used successfully to treat tinnitus.
- The symptoms of tinnitus can result in psychological problems for some people, such as depression and anxiety. Medication and counselling can help.

REFERENCES