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Review

Standardization of Medico-Legal Expertise in Post-Traumatic Hearing Loss: A Review of Mechanisms, Diagnostic Methods, and Gaps in Practice

Daniel George Boicu[1,†], Madalina-Maria Diac[1,*], Andrei Scripcaru[1], Ioana Martu[1,*], Oana Roxana Bitere-Popa[1,†], Sebastian Romica Cozma[1,†], Tudor Ciuhodaru[2], Raluca Olariu[1], Alin Ciubotaru[1] and Diana Bulgaru Iliescu[1]

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1 Grigore T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi, No. 16, 700115 Iasi, Romania;
2 Apollonia University, Emergency Hospital "Prof. Dr.N. Oblu", Iasi, Romania

* Correspondence: madalina-maria.diac@umfiasi.ro; ioana.martu@umfiasi.ro
† These authors have equal contributions to the paper as the first author

Abstract: Post-traumatic hearing loss (PTHL) frequently occurs following traumatic brain injuries and temporal bone fractures, significantly impacting quality of life and carrying substantial medico-legal implications. Despite advances in clinical audiology, PTHL assessment faces challenges related to standardization, detection of non-organic hearing loss (NOHL), and establishing a robust causal link. This review aims to synthesize current scientific evidence on the mechanisms, evaluation, and medico-legal aspects of PTHL to provide a foundation for developing a standardized clinical and expert protocol. A comprehensive search was conducted in PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science databases (2003–2025) using keywords related to post-traumatic hearing loss, audiological evaluation, and medico-legal frameworks. From over 80 initially identified records, 29 key references (including original studies, guidelines) were selected for detailed synthesis after critical appraisal. The analysis revealed: (1) a clear correlation between the traumatic mechanism (fractures, cochlear concussion, fistula) and the type of hearing loss; (2) the critical importance of the "cross-check principle," whereby subjective tests (audiogram) are corroborated by objective measures (otoacoustic emissions—OAE, auditory brainstem response—ABR); (3) OAE and ABR as essential tools for identifying non-organic hearing loss; (4) significant gaps in current practice, including the lack of a standardized protocol, inconsistent use of objective tests, and unstructured interdisciplinary collaboration. PTHL assessment requires a shift from ad-hoc practice to a protocol-driven approach. Establishing a standardized procedural framework—incorporating a mandatory minimum test battery (including OAE/ABR), guidelines for interpreting discrepancies, and a structured interdisciplinary collaboration pathway—is essential for improving the accuracy, objectivity, and reliability of forensic conclusions. This review provides the scientific basis for implementing such innovation in practice.

Keywords: post-traumatic hearing loss, forensic medicine, audiometry, otoacoustic emissions, auditory brainstem response, standardization

1. Introduction

Post-traumatic hearing loss (PTHL) is a frequent and clinically important outcome of traumatic brain injuries and temporal bone fractures, significantly impacting both individual health and social compensation systems [1]. The effects on quality of life are well established, as hearing loss leads to social isolation, occupational difficulties, cognitive decline, and significant psychological burden [2].

Given the rising global incidence of head injuries resulting from road accidents, occupational activities, and recreational pursuits, forensic expertise in the area of hearing impairment is becoming increasingly important [3,4].

From a pathophysiological standpoint, post-traumatic hearing loss is a heterogeneous condition that may be conductive (due to injury to the tympanic membrane or ossicular chain), sensorineural (resulting from cochlear concussion, auditory nerve injury, or central auditory pathway damage), or mixed [5,6]. The mechanisms are complex and include, among others, fractures of the bony labyrinth, perilymphatic fistulas, cochlear vascular thrombosis, or shearing injuries to neural tissue [7,8]. This pathological diversity is reflected in a broad clinical spectrum, where hearing impairment may be associated with tinnitus, vertigo, balance disorders, and, in severe cases, facial paralysis [9].

Remarkable technological progress has refined the clinical evaluation of these patients. Modern audiology relies on the fundamental principle of "cross-checking," whereby findings from subjective assessments—pure-tone audiometry and speech audiometry, essential for the functional mapping of the deficit—are corroborated by objective physiological measures [10,11]. Among these, otoacoustic emissions (OAEs) provide insight into the functional integrity of the outer hair cells of the cochlea, while auditory brainstem responses (ABRs) assess the integrity of the auditory pathway up to the brainstem nuclei, playing a crucial role in identifying retrocochlear lesions and in evaluating uncooperative patients or those with suspected non-organic hearing loss [10,12]. Auditory steady-state responses (ASSR) are particularly valuable in objective electrophysiological assessment as they allow frequency-specific and quantitative estimation of hearing thresholds across a wide intensity range, making them useful in challenging diagnostic scenarios such as suspected non-organic hearing loss [10].

Medical imaging, particularly high-resolution computed tomography (CT) of the temporal bone and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), complements the evaluation by directly visualizing structural lesions, providing incontrovertible anatomical evidence of fractures, ossicular dislocations, or retrocochlear damage [8,13].

In the medico-legal field, the evaluation of post-traumatic hearing loss faces distinct methodological and interpretive challenges. The primary task is to establish a definite, probable, or possible causal relationship between the traumatic event and the reported hearing impairment, in a context where secondary gain motives for exaggeration or simulation may exist [14]. Non-organic hearing loss whether psychogenic (conversion disorder) or simulated (malingering) represents a complex diagnostic challenge. Its detection relies on identifying inconsistencies in the audiological profile (e.g., discrepancies between pure-tone and speech audiometry, absence of stapedius reflexes despite abnormal pure-tone thresholds) and, critically, on observing normal results on objective tests (OAE, ABR) despite abnormal subjective thresholds [10,15].

The absence of standardized protocols with clear investigation algorithms and widely accepted operational criteria for interpreting these discrepancies introduces variability and subjectivity into expert opinions, potentially leading to incorrect legal decisions or contested conclusions [16]. Furthermore, the literature suggests that post-traumatic hearing loss may exhibit a progressive or delayed onset, even after mild traumatic brain injury, a phenomenon attributed to secondary degenerative or "die-back" processes of neurons [17,18]. This factor necessitates a dynamic approach to expertise, involving serial evaluations at predefined intervals to fully capture the extent of the damage [19].

Despite these advances in understanding and technology, the development of a unified, mandatory, and reproducible protocol for forensic expertise remains an unfulfilled goal. This gap is particularly evident in the Romanian national context, where current practices vary significantly between institutions and individual experts [20]. In Romania, the collaboration between forensic medicine institutes, audiology departments, and otorhinolaryngology (ENT) clinics is often informal and lacks a structured, standardized workflow. There are no nationally agreed-upon standard operating procedures (SOPs) that define the minimum required test battery, calibration standards, testing conditions, criteria for result validity, or a consolidated reporting format tailored to legal requirements [21]. This lack of standardization introduces variability and subjectivity into expert opinions, potentially leading to inconsistent legal outcomes or contested conclusions in compensation claims. Addressing this national gap is not merely an academic exercise but a practical necessity to ensure equitable and scientifically valid forensic assessments for all Romanian citizens affected by PTHL [22,23].

Aim and Objectives of the Review

Given the pathophysiological complexity, the diversity of available diagnostic tools, and the identified lack of standardization particularly within the Romanian forensic system this review has a clear and practical primary aim: to provide a critical synthesis and comprehensive scientific foundation for the development, implementation, and validation of an optimized and standardized procedural framework specifically for the medico-legal assessment of post-traumatic hearing loss [24].

To achieve this overarching aim, this review pursues the following specific objectives:

1. To synthesize the current understanding of the etiopathogenic mechanisms of PTHL and their clinical implications, providing the biological basis for causality assessment.
2. To critically evaluate the diagnostic modalities available for PTHL assessment (subjective, objective, and imaging), with particular emphasis on their evidentiary value in a forensic context and their role in detecting non-organic hearing loss.
3. To identify and analyze the key methodological challenges in forensic PTHL evaluation, including the assessment of causality in the presence of pre-existing conditions and the detection of simulation or exaggeration.
4. To explicitly document the gaps and inconsistencies in current practice, with a specific focus on the Romanian national context, where the absence of standardized protocols and structured interdisciplinary collaboration is most pronounced.
5. To formulate a set of evidence-based recommendations for a standardized procedural framework, including a minimum mandatory test battery, a decision-making algorithm, and a structured model for interdisciplinary collaboration.

By achieving these objectives, this review aims to bridge the gap between the theoretical domain of neuro-otology and the practical demands of forensic medicine, ultimately contributing to a more objective, reproducible, and equitable forensic evaluation process for post-traumatic hearing loss.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper is a **narrative review** of the literature, designed to synthesize, critically analyze, and integrate existing scientific knowledge on post-traumatic hearing loss (PTHL) from both a clinical and a medico-legal perspective. Unlike a systematic review or meta-analysis, which aims to quantitatively pool data from multiple studies, a narrative review provides a comprehensive overview of a topic by summarizing and interpreting the available evidence, identifying key themes, and highlighting gaps in current knowledge. This approach is particularly suitable for complex, multidisciplinary topics such as PTHL, where the heterogeneity of study designs, patient populations, and outcome measures makes quantitative synthesis impractical [1].

2.1. Search Strategy and Information Sources

A comprehensive literature search was conducted to identify relevant publications. The following electronic databases were searched:

- **PubMed/MEDLINE**
- **Scopus**
- **Web of Science Core Collection**

The search was limited to articles published between **January 2003 and December 2025**. This timeframe was chosen to capture the most significant advances in the field over the past two decades, particularly in the areas of objective audiology (e.g., otoacoustic emissions, auditory brainstem responses), high-resolution temporal bone imaging, and the evolving understanding of the medico-legal aspects of hearing loss.

The search strategy combined keywords and free-text terms using Boolean operators (AND, OR). The terms were grouped into three main conceptual domains to ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic:

1. Pathology and Etiology Domain:

- ("hearing loss" OR "deafness" OR "hearing impairment")
- AND
- ("post-traumatic" OR "traumatic brain injury" OR "TBI" OR "head trauma" OR "temporal bone fracture" OR "skull fracture")

2. Diagnosis and Evaluation Domain:

- ("audiometry" OR "pure-tone audiometry" OR "speech audiometry")
- OR ("auditory evoked potentials" OR "brainstem evoked response audiometry" OR "ABR" OR "BERA")
- OR ("otoacoustic emissions" OR "OAE" OR "transient evoked otoacoustic emissions" OR "TEOAE" OR "distortion product otoacoustic emissions" OR "DPOAE")
- OR ("tympanometry" OR "acoustic reflex" OR "stapedius reflex")
- OR ("temporal bone CT" OR "high-resolution computed tomography" OR "magnetic resonance imaging" OR "MRI")

3. Medico-Legal and Forensic Domain:

- ("forensic medicine" OR "forensic assessment" OR "medico-legal" OR "expert witness" OR "legal medicine")
- OR ("compensation" OR "disability evaluation" OR "impairment rating")
- OR ("simulation" OR "malingering" OR "non-organic hearing loss" OR "functional hearing loss" OR "psychogenic hearing loss")
- OR ("protocol" OR "standardization" OR "guideline" OR "consensus" OR "best practice")

In addition to the database searches, a **manual search** (often referred to as "snowballing" or "citation tracking") was performed by examining the reference lists of relevant review articles and key original studies. This method helps to identify additional publications that may not have been captured by the initial database search. Furthermore, the websites of relevant professional organizations were consulted to identify clinical practice guidelines, position statements, and consensus documents. These organizations included:

- World Health Organization (WHO)
- American Academy of Audiology (AAA)
- American Academy of Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery (AAO-HNS)
- British Society of Audiology (BSA)
- International Association of Forensic Sciences (IAFS)
- Handling of conflicting findings: During the synthesis process, instances of disagreement or conflicting findings between studies were identified and addressed systematically. When such conflicts arose, the following approach was used:
- Study quality assessment: The methodological quality of the conflicting studies was evaluated based on factors such as study design, sample size, and risk of bias. Higher-quality evidence (e.g., large prospective cohort studies, systematic reviews) was given greater weight in the synthesis.
- Source of heterogeneity: Conflicting findings were analyzed in the context of differences in study populations, diagnostic methods, or outcome measures that could explain the discrepancies.

- Expert consensus: When conflicting findings could not be resolved based on methodological considerations alone, the interpretation was guided by the consensus of the co-authors, who include experts in audiology, otorhinolaryngology, and forensic medicine. Disagreements were discussed until a consensus was reached on how to present the conflicting evidence in a balanced manner.
- Transparent reporting: In cases where significant disagreement persisted in the literature, this was explicitly acknowledged in the text, and both perspectives were presented to provide readers with a complete picture of the current state of knowledge.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Publications were considered for inclusion in this review if they met the following criteria:

Inclusion Criteria:

- **Type of publication:** Peer-reviewed original research articles (including observational studies such as cohort, case-control, and cross-sectional studies, as well as experimental studies), systematic reviews, meta-analyses, narrative reviews, clinical practice guidelines, consensus statements, and authoritative textbook chapters.
- **Population:** Studies involving human subjects (adults or mixed-age populations) with suspected or confirmed post-traumatic hearing loss of any type (conductive, sensorineural, mixed, or central).
- **Content:** Articles that addressed one or more of the following aspects of PTHL:
  - Pathophysiological mechanisms and etiology
  - Diagnostic methods and audiological assessment techniques
  - Imaging findings and their correlation with hearing loss
  - Medico-legal evaluation, including causality assessment and detection of non-organic hearing loss
  - Protocols, guidelines, or standardization efforts in the assessment of PTHL
- **Language:** Articles published in English.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Editorials, letters to the editor, opinion pieces, and commentaries without original data or substantive analysis.
- Conference abstracts and proceedings (due to limited peer review and insufficient methodological detail).
- Individual case reports or small case series (fewer than 5 patients) with limited generalizability, unless they described a novel finding or phenomenon of exceptional heuristic value.
- Studies focusing exclusively on hearing loss of non-traumatic etiology (e.g., congenital, genetic, infectious, ototoxic, or age-related hearing loss) without any reference to trauma.
- Articles not available in English.

Language restriction and its implications: Studies published in languages other than English were excluded from this review. This decision was made for practical reasons, as the research team's proficiency is limited to English and the resources for professional translation of full-text articles were not available. However, we acknowledge that this language restriction may introduce a potential language bias, as relevant studies published in other languages (e.g., German, French, Spanish, or Romanian) may have been omitted. This could affect the generalizability of our findings, particularly since some national practices and protocols may be published in local languages. To partially mitigate this limitation, we ensured that our search included databases with broad international coverage, and we manually searched reference lists of included articles to identify any frequently cited non-English studies that might have been missed. Nevertheless, readers should interpret the findings with this limitation in mind.

2.3. Study Selection Process

The selection of studies for inclusion in this review was performed in a stepwise manner:

1. **Title and Abstract Screening:** All records retrieved from the database searches were imported into a reference management software. Duplicates were removed. Two reviewers (D.G.B. and O.R.B.P.) independently screened the titles and abstracts of all remaining records against the pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Records that clearly did not meet the criteria were excluded. Disagreements between reviewers were resolved through discussion or by consultation with a third reviewer (S.R.C.).
2. **Full-Text Assessment:** For all records that passed the initial screening, the full-text articles were obtained and assessed independently by the same two reviewers for final eligibility. Reasons for exclusion at this stage were documented.

The manual search (snowballing) and the review of organizational websites were conducted concurrently, and any potentially relevant publications identified through these methods were subjected to the same full-text assessment process.

The database search yielded approximately 850 records. After removing duplicates, 620 records remained for title and abstract screening. Of these, 520 records were excluded based on title and abstract (e.g., non-traumatic etiology, irrelevant population, non-English language without abstract). The remaining 100 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Following full-text review, 71 articles were excluded for the following reasons: focus on non-traumatic hearing loss (n=32), insufficient methodological detail or case reports with <5 patients (n=24), non-English full text (n=9), and unavailable full text (n=6). An additional 10 relevant records were identified through manual snowballing and organizational websites. Thus, a total of 39 full-text articles were included in the final qualitative synthesis. However, to maintain focus and avoid redundancy, the most representative 29 references are cited in this review.

2.4. Data Extraction and Synthesis

Given the narrative and qualitative nature of this review, a formal quantitative data extraction for meta-analysis was not performed. Instead, relevant information was extracted from the included studies and organized thematically to address the predefined objectives of the review.

Handling of conflicting findings: During the synthesis process, instances of disagreement or conflicting findings between studies were identified and addressed systematically. When such conflicts arose, the following approach was used:

- **Study quality assessment:** The methodological quality of the conflicting studies was evaluated based on factors such as study design, sample size, and risk of bias. Higher-quality evidence (e.g., large prospective cohort studies, systematic reviews) was given greater weight in the synthesis.
- **Source of heterogeneity:** Conflicting findings were analyzed in the context of differences in study populations, diagnostic methods, or outcome measures that could explain the discrepancies.
- **Expert consensus:** When conflicting findings could not be resolved based on methodological considerations alone, the interpretation was guided by the consensus of the co-

authors, who include experts in audiology, otorhinolaryngology, and forensic medicine. Disagreements were discussed until a consensus was reached on how to present the conflicting evidence in a balanced manner.

- **Transparent reporting:** In cases where significant disagreement persisted in the literature, this was explicitly acknowledged in the text, and both perspectives were presented to provide readers with a complete picture of the current state of knowledge.

For each included article, the following information was extracted into a standardized summary table:

- Author(s) and year of publication
- Type of publication (e.g., original research, review, guideline)
- Study design (for original research)
- Sample size and population characteristics (if applicable)
- Key topic areas addressed (e.g., pathophysiology, diagnosis, imaging, medico-legal issues)
- Main findings and conclusions relevant to the objectives of this review
- Any recommendations for clinical practice or future research

The extracted data were then synthesized using a **thematic narrative approach**. This involved:

- **Identifying recurring themes and patterns** across the literature (e.g., the importance of the "cross-check principle," the challenges of detecting non-organic hearing loss, the need for standardized protocols).
- **Comparing and contrasting findings** from different studies to identify areas of consensus and disagreement.
- **Critically appraising the evidence** to assess its strength and limitations.
- **Identifying gaps in the current knowledge** and areas where further research is needed.

The synthesis was structured according to the main thematic areas outlined in the objectives of this review:

- **Pathophysiological mechanisms and their clinical correlates** (linking specific types of trauma to specific patterns of hearing loss).
- **Diagnostic modalities and their role in the medico-legal context**(evaluating the strengths, limitations, and evidentiary value of subjective and objective tests).
- **Key methodological challenges** (specifically, the detection of non-organic hearing loss and the assessment of causality).
- **Identified gaps and inconsistencies in current practice** (lack of standardization, variability in test selection, unstructured interdisciplinary collaboration).

2.5. Limitations of the Methodology

As a narrative review, this study has certain inherent limitations that should be acknowledged:

- **Potential for selection bias:** Although a comprehensive search strategy was employed, the selection of studies for inclusion involves subjective judgment, and it is possible that some relevant publications were inadvertently omitted.
- **Lack of quantitative synthesis:** Unlike a systematic review with meta-analysis, this review does not provide a pooled statistical estimate of effect sizes. The conclusions are based on qualitative interpretation and synthesis of the literature.
- **Language restriction:** The exclusion of non-English articles may have introduced a language bias, potentially omitting relevant studies published in other languages.

- **Narrative synthesis:** The thematic synthesis is inherently interpretive and may be influenced by the perspectives of the authors.

Despite these limitations, the methodology employed is appropriate for the aims of this review, which is to provide a comprehensive and critical overview of the field and to identify the scientific basis for developing a standardized procedural framework for the medico-legal assessment of post-traumatic hearing loss.

2. Results

An in-depth examination of more than 80 chosen scientific articles facilitated the gathering of vital information, thematically summarized below. The structure of this chapter mirrors the defined goals, sequentially outlining the pathophysiological mechanisms, diagnostic tools, medicolegal issues, and deficiencies recognized in existing practice.

Pathophysiological Mechanisms and Clinical Associations: From Traumatic Impact to Type of Hearing Impairment

Post-traumatic hearing loss (PTHL) occurs due to the direct or indirect impact of acceleration-deceleration, compression, or shearing forces on the auditory system's structures. Literature data provide a distinct etiopathogenic classification that is directly linked to the type of hearing impairment that results, Table 1.

Table 1: Pathophysiological Mechanisms and Clinical Correlates of Post-Traumatic Hearing Loss

Mechanism & Lesion Site	Hearing Loss Type	Key Clinical Features	Primary Diagnostic Evidence
Longitudinal Temporal Bone Fracture Ossicular chain disruption, TM rupture	Conductive / Mixed	Otorrhea, hemotympanum, mild vestibular symptoms.	High-resolution Temporal Bone CT; Air-bone gap on PTA.
Transverse Temporal Bone Fracture Cochlear/CN VIII direct injury	Profound Sensorineural / Mixed	Profound HL, severe vertigo, tinnitus, facial palsy (common).	Temporal Bone CT + MRI; Absent OAEs; Absent/abnormal ABR.
Cochlear Concussion Metabolic/mechanical hair cell injury (no fracture)	Sensorineural (high-freq. notch)	Immediate onset, tinnitus, possible progression.	PTA (4-8 kHz notch); Reduced/absent OAEs in affected range.
Perilymphatic Fistula Oval/round window rupture	Mixed / Fluctuant SNHL	Fluctuant HL, vertigo triggered by pressure/effort, aural fullness.	Clinical history + exam; Surgical exploration (definitive).
Retrocochlear Shearing Injury CN VIII or brainstem pathway lesion	Sensorineural (Retrocochlear)	Poor speech discrimination disproportionate to PTA.	MRI cerebellopontine angle; ABR with prolonged I-V interval (>4.4 ms) or absent wave V.

Note: Synthesized from data in [5-9,13,17,18,23,25,28].

A key clinical factor emphasized by several longitudinal studies is the possibility of progressive development of PTHL. Bergemalm (2003) showed that in a group of patients with closed head injuries, nearly 25% underwent significant hearing loss within 3-5 years after the injury, a situation linked to delayed neuronal degeneration ("die-back") and cochlear fibrosis [25]. This reality clinically and legally supports the necessity for a waiting time ("latency period") and audiological reassessments at 6 and 12 months to determine the ultimate stabilized threshold [26].

Analysis of 12 original studies and 3 systematic reviews on temporal bone fractures and cochlear trauma [5-9,13,17,18,23,25,28] provided a distinct etiopathogenic classification directly linked to the type of hearing impairment (Table 1).

The Contemporary Audiological Battery in Medicolegal Evaluation: Cross-Verification and Evidentiary Significance

Evaluating a PTHL case for expert input necessitates the steady use of the "cross-check principle," where each examination adds a unique dimension of information, and result consistency enhances diagnostic confidence. Table 2 outlines the function of each examination.

This principle is supported by four major audiology textbooks [10-12,15] and six clinical guidelines from international audiology societies [10,11,14,16,20,21], which consistently emphasize the need for objective test corroboration in forensic contexts.

Table 2: Role and Probative Value of Investigation Methods in PTHL Expert Assessment.

Test Modality	Core Function & Measured Parameter	Primary Value in Expert Assessment	Critical Limitations for Expert Context
Pure-Tone Audiometry (PTA)	Subjective hearing thresholds; defines type/degree of HL.	Baseline document of functional impairment. Legally required. Highly susceptible to non-organic influence.	Purely subjective. Must be validated by objective tests. Requires controlled test environment.
Speech Audiometry	Speech Reception Threshold (SRT); Word Recognition Score (WRS).	Detects critical incongruities: Normal WRS with profound PTA (suggests non-organic) or very poor WRS with mild PTA (suggests retrocochlear).	Language/articulation dependent. Less standardized than PTA.
Otoacoustic Emissions (OAEs)	Objective measure of outer hair cell function.	"Physiological witness" for cochlear integrity. Presence of OAEs with profound subjective HL is pathognomonic for non-organic loss. Fast, objective, non-invasive.	Absent in true cochlear injury. Blocked by middle ear pathology. Does not assess neural pathways.
Auditory Brainstem Response (ABR)	Objective measure of synchronous neural activity (CN VIII to midbrain).	Objectifies the neural auditory pathway. Validates organic loss (threshold correlation). ABR abnormalities (e.g., prolonged I-V interval) provide objective evidence of retrocochlear lesion. Essential for non-cooperative subjects.	Less frequency-specific than PTA. More time-consuming/costly than OAEs.
Tympanometry/Acoustic Reflexes	Middle ear compliance; brainstem reflex arc integrity.	Objectifies conductive component. Intact reflexes with significant HL suggest non-organic component.	Does not directly assess hearing sensitivity. Reflexes can be absent in severe cochlear loss.
Temporal Bone CT	High-resolution bony anatomy.	Gold standard for osseous trauma (fractures, dislocations). Provides incontrovertible anatomic proof of injury.	Radiation exposure. Poor for soft tissue/neural pathology.
MRI	Soft tissue, neural, and brain parenchyma detail.	Indicated for suspected retrocochlear (e.g., acoustic neuroma) or central pathology based on clinical/ABR findings.	Contraindications (metals). Access, cost, claustrophobia.

Note: Based on synthesis from [10-12,14-16,20-22].

Key Methodological Issues: Non-organic Hearing Impairment and Causal Evaluation

Identification of non-organic hearing loss (NOHL), encompassing simulation, is fundamental to professional evaluation. A synthesis of eight original studies on non-organic hearing loss[10,14-16,20-22] and two expert consensus statements [15,21] identified several 'red flags' that, when grouped together, create a questionable pattern:

- Audiometric incongruence: Intact speech discrimination (90–100%) alongside severe/profound pure-tone hearing loss.
- Significant test-retest variability: Variations exceeding 15–20 dB when repeating the audiogram within the same session, excluding the learning curve.
- Absence of physiological connection: Existence of typical OAEs and/or normal organic peripheral cochlear damage at levels that match an ostensibly severe/profound pure-tone threshold. This serves as the most compelling objective proof against an organic peripheral cochlear lesion.
- Reactions to unusual assessments: Breakdown in certain simulation evaluations, albeit with reduced specificity.

Linking trauma and PTHL in a causal manner is a complicated inferential process. The examination emphasizes four vital standards:

- Temporality: Abrupt onset or escalation of hearing impairment closely linked in time to the injury.
- Biological plausibility: Consistency between the outlined traumatic mechanism and the observed audiological/imaging lesion pattern (refer to Table 1).

- Elimination of alternative causes: Examination and ruling out of other significant etiologies (e.g. acoustic neuroma, autoimmune disorders, ototoxicity) through appropriate assessments (MRI, lab tests)

Discrepancies and inconsistencies found in professional practices

Analysis of 15 articles addressing current practice patterns[8,13,16,19-24] revealed several systematic gaps that compromise the quality and consistency of PTHL expertise:

1. Lack of an international standardized protocol: There is no consensus on a "minimum mandatory battery" of tests for expert assessment of PTHL. The choice of investigations is often left to the discretion of the expert or the clinic.
2. Deficiencies in the assessment of NOHL: Many centers do not systematically include OAEs or ABRs in the initial assessment, resorting to them only in cases of suspicion, which may leave some cases of NOHL undetected.
3. Variability in the use and interpretation of imaging: The indication and interpretation of temporal bone CT varies; sometimes it is requested for any minor head trauma, sometimes it is omitted even in cases with direct ear trauma.
4. Informalized interdisciplinary collaboration: The flow of patients and information between forensic medicine, audiology, and ENT is often bureaucratic and inefficient, delaying expert assessment and fragmenting the medical record.

These gaps fully justify the effort to develop an optimized procedural framework that addresses the identified deficiencies and formalizes a practice based on the strongest scientific evidence available.

4. Disscusion

This This narrative review has highlighted the complex and multifaceted nature of medico-legal expertise in PTHL, providing a comprehensive synthesis of the current scientific evidence. By integrating findings from pathophysiological mechanisms, diagnostic modalities, and forensic challenges, this review establishes a solid foundation for advancing clinical and expert practice. The discussion below synthesizes the key findings, examines their implications, and proposes a conceptual framework for standardization.

4.1. Pathophysiological Heterogeneity and Its Forensic Implications

The analysis confirms that PTHL is not a unitary entity but rather a spectrum of disorders resulting from diverse traumatic mechanisms (Table 1). This heterogeneity is not merely an academic distinction; it forms the cornerstone of causality assessment in the medico-legal context. The alignment between the reported traumatic mechanism, the imaging findings, and the audiological profile is essential for establishing biological plausibility one of the key criteria for determining a causal relationship [27].

For instance, a longitudinal temporal bone fracture with ossicular chain disruption cannot plausibly explain an isolated profound sensorineural hearing loss without additional evidence of cochlear or nerve injury. Conversely, the presence of a transverse fracture involving the otic capsule provides strong anatomical evidence for sensorineural damage. This principle of *anatomo-functional correlation* must be systematically applied in forensic evaluations to distinguish between truly trauma-related hearing loss and cases where the impairment may be coincidental or exaggerated.

Furthermore, the literature supports the concept of *progressive or delayed-onset PTHL*, even after apparently mild head trauma [17,18]. Bergemalm [25] demonstrated that nearly 25% of patients with closed head injuries experienced significant hearing deterioration within 3–5 years post-injury, a phenomenon attributed to delayed neuronal degeneration ("die-back") and cochlear fibrosis. This finding has critical forensic implications: it necessitates a dynamic approach to expertise, including serial audiological assessments at predefined intervals (e.g., 6 and 12 months) to determine the final stabilized hearing threshold before issuing a definitive medico-legal conclusion [26].

4.2. The Central Role of Objective Tests in Forensic Assessment

One of the most significant findings of this review is the imperative to move beyond sole reliance on pure-tone audiometry (PTA) as the primary evidence of hearing loss in forensic settings. While PTA remains essential for documenting the functional impairment and is legally required, it is inherently subjective and susceptible to both conscious (simulation) and unconscious (conversion disorder) distortion [10,15].

The data synthesized in Table 2 demonstrate that objective physiological tests particularly otoacoustic emissions (OAEs) and auditory brainstem responses (ABRs) are not merely adjunctive investigations but rather fundamental pillars of a robust forensic framework. These tests operate on two complementary levels:

- **Affirmative confirmation:** ABR provides an electrophysiological correlate of the auditory pathway's integrity, allowing objective verification of pure-tone thresholds and identification of retrocochlear lesions. When ABR thresholds correlate well with PTA findings, the organic nature of the hearing loss is strongly supported [11,12].
- **Definitive exclusion:** OAEs serve as a "physiological witness" to the functional status of the outer hair cells in the cochlea. The presence of robust OAEs in a patient claiming profound sensorineural hearing loss provides compelling objective evidence against a peripheral organic lesion. This finding is considered *pathognomonic* for non-organic hearing loss (NOHL) and represents one of the most powerful tools in the forensic armamentarium [10,22].

The systematic inclusion of OAEs and ABR in the initial assessment battery, rather than as second-line tests reserved for suspected cases, is therefore essential for ensuring the accuracy and objectivity of forensic conclusions. Delaying these tests until after suspicion arises risks missing cases where simulation is subtle or where patients with conversion disorders may be incorrectly labeled as malingerers [15,21].

4.3. Addressing Key Methodological Challenges

4.3.1. Non-Organic Hearing Loss (NOHL)

The detection of NOHL remains one of the most challenging aspects of PTHL expertise. The literature converges on several "red flags" that should raise suspicion [10,15]:

- **Audiometric incongruence:** Normal or near-normal speech discrimination scores (90–100%) in the presence of severe-to-profound pure-tone hearing loss.
  Clinical example: A 45-year-old patient involved in a road traffic accident claims inability to hear conversational speech. Pure-tone audiometry reveals a threshold of 85 dB HL in both ears (profound loss), yet speech discrimination scores are 96% at comfortable loudness levels. This discrepancy is physiologically implausible, as profound cochlear damage would severely impair speech understanding.
- **Excessive test-retest variability:** Fluctuations exceeding 15–20 dB on repeated pure-tone testing within the same session, beyond what can be attributed to learning effects or patient fatigue.
  Clinical example: During the same audiological evaluation, a patient's thresholds at 1000 Hz vary by 25 dB between two consecutive presentations, with no change in test conditions. Such inconsistency suggests poor effort or intentional manipulation rather than organic hearing loss.
- **Absence of physiological correlates:** Normal otoacoustic emissions (OAEs) and/or auditory brainstem responses (ABRs) despite abnormal subjective thresholds.
  Clinical example: A 38-year-old claimant presents with bilateral "profound sensorineural hearing loss" following a mild head injury. Pure-tone audiometry shows no responses at the limits of the audiometer. However, distortion product otoacoustic emissions (DPOAEs) are present and robust across all frequencies, and ABR shows normal wave V thresholds at 20 dB nHL. These findings definitively rule out peripheral organic hearing loss and confirm NOHL.
- **Performance on non-routine tasks:** Inconsistent or exaggerated responses on specialized tests for malingering, such as the Stenger test (for unilateral losses) or the Yes/No test.
  Clinical example: In a case of claimed unilateral deafness, the Stenger test which relies on the principle of binaural interaction reveals responses inconsistent with the claimed profound loss, indicating voluntary control over the reported threshold.
- **Behavioral observations:** Obvious inconsistencies between the patient's reported disability and their observed behavior in the waiting room or during breaks.
  Clinical example: A patient claiming total deafness is observed turning their head and responding appropriately to a colleague's comment in the waiting area, yet during testing, they fail to respond to tones at 100 dB HL.

Importantly, the distinction between *simulation* (conscious, motivated by secondary gain) and *conversion disorder* (unconscious, psychogenic) has both diagnostic and legal implications. While objective tests can identify the presence of NOHL, distinguishing between these entities often requires psychological or psychiatric evaluation and falls outside the scope of audiological expertise alone [14]. Forensic reports should therefore describe the objective findings without overstepping into speculative psychodiagnosis.

4.3.2. Causality Assessment

Establishing a causal link between trauma and hearing loss requires a structured inferential process based on four classical criteria, adapted from forensic medicine principles [14,16]:

1. **Temporality:** The hearing loss must have onset or significant worsening in close temporal relationship to the traumatic event.
2. **Biological plausibility:** The type and pattern of hearing loss must be consistent with the known pathophysiological consequences of the specific traumatic mechanism (Table 1).
3. **Exclusion of alternative causes:** Other potential etiologies (e.g., presbycusis, noise-induced hearing loss, ototoxic medications, acoustic neuroma) must be reasonably ruled out through appropriate investigations (imaging, laboratory tests, clinical history).

4. **Gradient of exposure:** Where possible, the severity of trauma should correlate with the likelihood and extent of hearing damage—a criterion that remains largely qualitative due to the difficulty of quantifying traumatic energy in clinical practice.

In practice, many cases involve *pre-existing hearing loss* (e.g., age-related or occupational) where the trauma has caused additional deterioration. In such situations, expertise must determine the *specific contribution* of the trauma to the overall impairment, rather than attributing the entire deficit to the event. This requires access to pre-trauma audiological records when available, or, in their absence, a reasoned estimate based on age-matched normative data and the pattern of loss [16].

4.4. Identified Gaps in Current Practice

The literature review revealed several systematic deficiencies that compromise the quality and consistency of PTHL expertise:

- **Lack of standardized protocols:** There is no international or national consensus on a "minimum mandatory test battery" for forensic PTHL assessment. The choice of investigations is often left to individual expert judgment, leading to significant variability in practice [20].
- **Inconsistent use of objective tests:** Many centers do not routinely include OAEs or ABR in their initial assessment, reserving them for cases where NOHL is already suspected. This approach may fail to detect subtle or well-concealed simulation [21].
- **Variability in imaging practices:** Indications for temporal bone CT vary widely; some experts request it for minor head trauma without otological symptoms, while others omit it even in cases with clear indications (e.g., hemotympanum, cerebrospinal fluid otorrhea) [8,13].
- **Unstructured interdisciplinary collaboration:** The flow of information and patients between forensic medicine, audiology, and ENT departments is often informal, leading to delays, fragmented records, and missed opportunities for integrated interpretation [23].

These gaps are particularly pronounced in the **Romanian national context**, where no nationally agreed-upon standard operating procedures exist, and collaboration between institutions remains largely ad-hoc [20]. Addressing these deficiencies is not merely an academic exercise but a practical necessity for ensuring equitable and scientifically valid forensic outcomes.

Critical Gaps Ranked by Frequency and Impact

Based on the literature, the identified gaps can be prioritized as follows:

The most critical and frequently reported gap is the lack of standardized protocols, with no mandatory minimum test battery for forensic PTHL assessment. This leads to significant inter-expert variability, inconsistent conclusions, and contested legal decisions.

Closely related is the inconsistent use of objective tests (OAEs and ABR) , often reserved for suspected cases rather than included routinely. This risks missing non-organic hearing loss, potentially resulting in unwarranted compensation or unfair denial of legitimate claims.

A high-impact gap, particularly in the Romanian context, is the unstructured interdisciplinary collaboration between forensic medicine, audiology, and ENT, leading to fragmented records, delays, and missed diagnostic opportunities.

Moderate in frequency but clinically significant is the variability in imaging practices, with temporal bone CT either overused (unnecessary radiation) or underused (missed anatomical evidence of trauma).

An emerging challenge is the lack of consensus on causality assessment in cases with pre-existing hearing loss, making it difficult to quantify the trauma's specific contribution to overall impairment.

Finally, the absence of standardized reporting formats hinders legal professionals' ability to compare expert opinions and assess the certainty of conclusions.

Addressing these gaps particularly through mandatory test batteries and structured collaboration pathways is essential for improving forensic practice, especially in Romania [20].

4.5. Toward a Standardized Procedural Framework

Given the identified gaps, this review proposes the concept of a **Standardized Procedural Framework for Audiological Expertise (CPS-EA)** as a literature-grounded, evidence-based model for translating scientific knowledge into practical, replicable steps [29]. At this stage, the CPS-EA should be regarded as a conceptual proposal requiring further validation before clinical implementation. Its core modules would include:

- **Minimum Required Test Battery:** Mandatory inclusion of PTA, speech audiometry, tympanometry, OAEs, and ABR in all forensic assessments, with clear technical specifications for testing conditions, calibration, and result validity.
- **Decision-Making Algorithm:** Evidence-based pathways for interpreting discrepancies. For example: if PTA indicates profound hearing loss but OAEs and ABR are normal, the conclusion is NOHL, prompting further exploration (MRI to exclude retrocochlear pathology, psychological evaluation if indicated).
- **Interdisciplinary Collaboration Protocol:** Defined roles and responsibilities for each specialist (forensic expert, audiologist, radiologist, ENT consultant), standardized documentation procedures, and maximum timelines for report completion to ensure efficiency and traceability.

Such a framework would transform forensic expertise from an *authority-based* practice where conclusions rest primarily on the expert's individual judgment—to an *evidence-based, algorithm-driven* process, enhancing objectivity, reproducibility, and legal defensibility [24].

4.6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This narrative review has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a qualitative synthesis, it does not provide quantitative effect estimates or meta-analytic pooling of data. Second, the exclusion of non-English studies may have introduced language bias, potentially omitting relevant research published in other languages. Third, the selection and interpretation of studies involve subjective judgment, and despite efforts to be comprehensive, some relevant publications may have been inadvertently missed.

Future research should aim to:

1. **Validate the proposed CPS-EA framework** through prospective multicenter studies, assessing its feasibility, reliability, and impact on the consistency of forensic conclusions.
2. **Develop quantitative models of trauma exposure** linking physical parameters of injury (e.g., impact energy, acceleration forces) to specific audiological outcomes, thereby strengthening the biological plausibility criterion.
3. **Investigate objective markers of "hidden" cochlear injury** (e.g., spectro-temporal analysis of OAEs, cortical evoked potentials) that may detect auditory dysfunction in patients with normal pure-tone thresholds but genuine post-traumatic auditory complaints (e.g., tinnitus, difficulty understanding speech in noise) [28].
4. **Establish consensus-based guidelines** for reporting certainty levels in forensic conclusions, particularly in cases with pre-existing pathology where causal attribution is not binary but rather a matter of degree.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, the knowledge regarding posttraumatic hearing loss is currently experiencing an epistemological divergence. On one side, it has an advanced technological toolkit, able to offer physiological assurances. Conversely, its usage is limited by outdated paradigms, relying too heavily on subjectivism and variability among evaluators.

This analysis has shown that shifting from an expertise practice reliant on authority (of experts) to one grounded in physiologically validated algorithms is both a scientific and ethical imperative. This demonstrates that simulation can not only be suspected but can be ruled out through objective methods; likewise, the lesion can not only be characterized but can also be mapped using electrophysiological and imaging techniques.

The primary operational outcome is the necessity of instituting a CPS, which would mandate "cross-checking" not as a choice, but as an essential standard procedure. This framework would embody the truest conversion of evidence-based medicine into forensics, changing expertise into a clear, repeatable, and debatable procedure.

Consequently, the paper concludes not with a mere summary, but with an appeal for action: enhancing the reliability and accuracy of the HPT expertise system currently relies on the ability of the community of professionals – audiologists, ENT specialists, forensic physicians to collectively adopt, adapt, and implement the existing scientific standards.

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