



Inventors Professor Kevin Fynn and Professor Sven Nordholm (FRONT) look at the early Sensear prototype with their business partners Greg Beale and Justin Miller

MP3 players and similar music delivery systems might, at high volumes, be responsible for damaging hearing.

But the next time you think you see one plugged into somebody's ears, don't pull it out and lecture the wearer about hearing loss.

It could be that the earpiece you see is doing the exact opposite: saving that person's hearing.

The Western Australian Telecommunications Research Institute (WATRI), has taken the first steps towards commercialising one of their inventions that cuts out loud and potentially damaging background noise, while enhancing voices close by. It has the potential to be used with great success in noisy factories and in pubs and clubs where workers need to hear instructions or orders but want to block out the sound of machinery or loud music.

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The first prototype, featured in UWAnews last year, was part of a hard hat, which would be fine worn in an industrial situation, but not really suitable for wearing behind the bar of a pub.

Professor Kevin Fynn, Director of WATRI, said SENSEAR, the spin-off company created to refine and market the noise-

filtering device, had engaged industrial designers to come up with a system that is “snazzy enough” for the market.

“I imagine it will be something like an iPod, which has become socially acceptable now,” Professor Fynn said. “We all accept seeing people wearing small earplugs with a wire connecting them to something in your pocket.

“I can see that, if the design is unobtrusive enough, people at big tables in restaurants or in meetings will use them so they can hear the people they are facing (the microphones in the system are directional) while filtering out background noise,” he said.

SENSEAR is the fourth spin-off company created by WATRI. “Once you have the technology in place, you need business skills to get it into the market,” Professor Fynn said. “We have a great relationship with the Office of Industry and Innovation. And I would encourage other researchers around the University to do the same. Commercial success is only possible when you can bring to the table researchers, engineers, business managers and investors”

The business management team includes Bob Denby, the Chair of SENSEAR, who formerly was a managing director a big division of Wesfarmers; CEO Justin Miller and Vice President (marketing) Greg Beale.

“The investor, Seaspin, has provided the funding to produce a compact version of the product, and later this year, Justin and Greg will be taking these prototypes around the world promoting them to end-users,” he said.

Professor Fynn said that WATRI had a couple more innovative projects on the drawing board that he hopes to commercialise in the coming months.