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Introduction



I have been involved with hearing aids for over ten years and they continue to fascinate me. I was in private practice as a hearing aid audiologist initially, before moving to work for a major hearing aid manufacturer.

Now, I collaborate with a guy to bring clear honest advice to consumers centered around hearing aids and the people who provide them. I like to talk straight, laugh at gobshites (Irish technical term) and my sense of humour may well get on top of me. However, bear with me and I should be able to translate the gobbledygook.

This is the second of a series of books that I plan to provide and it centers on hearing aids themselves. Privately provided hearing aids are a big investment, I want to give you the knowledge to make that investment with confidence. Let's set the scene:

I am pretty sure I know the feeling.

You are in the middle of trying to decide which hearing aids might be for you but the gobbledygook is almost thicker than fog.

Which one is for you? What type is the best? What the hell are directional microphones? Even when you get an answer it can be more confusing.

So I have set out to detail all the details (see what I did there) however, I am going to try my best to give it to you in clear and plain English. What follows is a high level look at hearing aids, their technology levels, their pros and cons and the features inside.

I hope that this will give you the complete grounding in the subject that you need to make educated decisions.

This is perhaps the most exciting time I remember in hearing aids, it seems that innovation has massively sped up within the space. The hearing aids themselves work exceptionally well, far better than once was the case.

Now we have new innovations it seems every month, the introduction of hearing aids connected to the internet, the introduction of rechargeable hearing aids that can be relied on, the introduction of remote fine tuning and fitting of hearing aids.

It seems like the list just goes on and on, the future of hearing aids and what they can deliver for users seems to be exceptionally bright. We at Hearing Aid Know will do our best to continue to bring you news and explanations of the technology as it evolves.

You can read more about hearing aids and the people who provide them on our website at

Hearing Aid Know

In this the second edition of the book I want to discuss the hearing aids available a little further, but I also want to discuss the providers who deliver them and the tests that are undertaken.

It occurred to me that not to do so in the first edition was probably a bit stupid of me. However, I beg your forgiveness, I was really focused on providing decent info on hearing aids at the time, so that is why it slipped my attention.

I have also expanded slightly on the hearing aid pages, in the first edition I shied away from discussing hearing aid brands or particular devices in particular. It just really didn't make sense for me to do so,

however, I noted that not to do so actually narrowed the advice I was giving.

Which again, just didn't make sense, so, here we go, once again into the breach. Let's talk about hearing aids.

Providers of Hearing Aids

In order to privately procure a hearing aid you need to attend a provider, pretty simple really, however, you have a choice of different types of providers available to you. There are corporate type providers such as Amplifon, Boots and Specsavers in the UK and Miracle Ear, Hear USA and Beltone in the US. There are also Independent providers who may be large multi branch outlets or smaller single outlet businesses. Let's talk about them.

Corporate Providers

Corporate providers usually offer a pretty good service including on-going aftercare, although with many it can be a bit like a conveyor belt. I worked for Amplifon in Ireland back in the day and I have to say that they were on the cutting edge of best practice and service. We provided an outstanding level of service to our Patients and they still do.

However, we worked within the constraints that were set and our business was sales, don't get me wrong, it also involved real committed care, but sales were what it was all about. Most corporate providers are built on this system, there is always some pressure on staff to sell, that is simply how they survive.

There will usually be some pressure on staff to sell one product line specifically in most corporate chains. Again Amplifon were a little different, they have a wide selection of brands but the pricing of the devices tends to control what is sold. Amplifon is a corporate entity but it is in fact independent of any manufacturer.

They have arrangements with particular manufacturers and those arrangements mean that certain brands are more advantageous for them to sell. However, as long as I was there they didn't interfere at

the macro level and let Dispensers sell whatever they felt best. This is an important consideration for you the buyer, let me explain.

Many corporate providers are in fact owned by hearing aid manufacturers, it simply means that they will sell you devices from that manufacturer, for instance Boots is owned by Sonova the owners of Phonak and Unitron. This type of vertical integration is just increasing within the business, more and more manufacturers are buying retail outlets.

This limits your choices, it is simple, more often than not you are getting one brand no matter what. Honestly, this doesn't necessarily mean that the device or brand won't be suitable for you, it just means there is no real choice on offer. I don't think that this is necessarily a bad thing, I just think that you should be clear on it. They really should make it clear to you, I believe an educated decision is nearly always a good one.

In essence, while corporates try to ensure that the best service and experience is on offer across their chains, it is sometimes not the case.

Independents

Independent providers are just that, they are independent of any hearing aid manufacturer or corporate entity. They are usually small family run businesses although some may be multi branch. More often than not though they are single branch entities that may offer their service in branch and perhaps across a few clinics situated in associated health partners such as Opticians or even Chemists/Pharmacies/Medical Centres.

Independents generally have access to all of the hearing aid manufacturers, however, in practice they will usually only use perhaps three brands at most generally. There will be a primary brand, and two secondary brands. Generally these are picked for a variety of reasons, some commercial in nature such as pricing and some clinical in nature such as efficacy and perhaps specialisation.

If I was running my own Independent practice I would probably choose Widex, Phonak and GN Resound as my three suppliers. I would choose them in particular because they would be able to provide me with pretty much everything I needed to meet the needs of my customers.

However, as different innovations came along I would be considering other brands or re-considering what share of each brand I supplied. Let me explain my thinking, Phonak is recognised as the leader in power hearing aids, so I would always consider Phonak for my power needs, however, GN Resound are the only manufacturer to supply a made for iPhone power hearing aid.

So it makes perfect sense for me to discuss these brands with someone who needs a power aid. Widex has a Power offering called the Super, but it is several years old now so I would discount it because I believe that both Phonak and Resound have superseded it with better technology. That is the freedom that being totally independent delivers, you make the best decisions based on the customer in front of you and the latest and best technology available.

What Does it Matter to You?

First of all, you want the latest and best for you and your hearing loss, it is as simple as that. Secondly, hearing aids aren't the same as glasses. You do not just put them on and everything is fine. That is a simple truth, hearing aids take time to get used to, they also take time to get the very best out of. This is usually called rehabilitation.

You might not realise it but the services of a good hearing professional is absolutely imperative for your ongoing experience. In order for you to get the best out of any hearing aids you buy, you will need a committed and skillful professional to help you.

Why do You Need Help?

As I said, hearing aids are not like glasses, firstly, by the time you choose to buy hearing aids you will probably have been suffering a

hearing loss for up to seven years or more. If I was to give you full amplification, the prescription you needed to correct your hearing, you would run screaming from my office. I do mean that, you wouldn't like it.

So, I will first set you to a reduced prescription, one that benefits you but doesn't challenge you too much. You will still note a dramatic difference, however it will be as much as you can handle. Over a period of time that really does vary from customer to customer I will then increase the amplification to your prescription level.

Think it's Over Then? Think Again

No, this isn't when the fat lady sings, generally your prescription level is just a starting point, a good starting point but just a starting point. Sound is a very personal sense, I like classical music my wife thinks it is noise. Each one of us is slightly different, unique in a way. Generally most people will need some fine tuning undertaken around their prescription to be happy with the sound of their hearing aids.

So finally, after all those appointments we have got you to a place where the sound the hearing aids produce is just right for you. That's when we start investigating the settings for different situations and discussing how you are getting on generally. This just doesn't happen in the first week or month, this takes time and effort both on your part and the part of the professional who is helping you. That professional needs to be dedicated to helping you.

Independent professionals are usually local business people who rely on the word of mouth of their customers to succeed in business. The fact that if they don't treat people right, they don't eat, is a pretty big incentive. However, more often than not, they are genuinely caring and committed to offering the very best service.

Independent hearing aid providers offer high levels of service and aftercare as standard. Normally they have set up their own businesses in order that they can do just that. National hearing aid providers are getting better and better at looking after their customers, however, everything within those providers is usually to a rigid plan.

Independents are truly flexible in their approach, delivering the service and aftercare that is needed when it is needed. You probably won't find many others who are as committed to ensuring you have the best experience. On top of that commitment and because a hearing aid provider is Independent, he or she does not have to march to the company guidelines when it comes to providing hearing aids.

It simply means that they will recommend hearing aids that are right for you and your lifestyle needs. Hearing healthcare professionals in National businesses will always try to do the same but because of company policies and changing commercial arrangements they may have to do so within a limited choice.

Buying a Hearing Aid

Purchasing a hearing device is a big decision on many levels, firstly there is a big financial outlay involved. On top of that is the psychology that seems to be inherent in the decision. It never fails to surprise me, but you aren't old, it isn't a sign of you losing it, it simply is. Hearing loss just happens, the best thing to do is deal with it.

The Price is Important, But so are Other Factors

Many first time buyers focus on the price of the instruments, I can understand that because they tend to be expensive. There are many other factors that you need to consider when you are thinking about buying hearing aids.

But let's focus on the price for a minute, the price of a hearing aid includes a lot of service, in fact years of it. For years I have spoken about un-bundling prices so it is clearer exactly what you are paying for, not many have done it.

Hearing aid price breakdown

So what are you paying for? Generally and certainly in the UK and Ireland you are paying for the instrument itself and all of the care and support that you are expected to be given for the lifetime of the instrument. In essence that means:

The fitting of the hearing aid

Follow up fine tuning visits to ensure the aid is customised for you

Either six monthly or yearly follow up appointments to service the aid and ensure you are still doing fine.

The lifetime of a hearing aid can be up to about ten years, after eight it can become difficult to get it repaired if it fails. So you are going to attend a lot of half hour to hour visits during that time.

That is exactly what you are paying for, time and professional expertise. When you have paid for it, don't be embarrassed about taking it up. I think that my time is worth money, just like any other professional who offers service, when you have paid me for that time, I always make sure that you get it.

Going For The Cheapest Price?

There can be a disparity in prices across different providers and it can be attractive to simply go for the cheapest option. What you have to ask yourself is, "is it like for like?". This is the most important question that you need to ask yourself, later in the hearing aid section I discuss hearing aids and their technology levels. I do so in order that you can consider this question in a more educated manner.

The cheapest price is not always the best option, you need to know all the facts surrounding that price and the equipment and service offered before you can make an educated decision. What service will be offered, what exactly are the hearing aids, are they the latest technology? When you have answers to these questions, it is easier to make decisions.

White Label Hearing Aids

Some corporate providers offer white label hearing aids, white label hearing aids are devices made by manufacturers with a special label. For instance, Specsavers has the Advance range, Hidden Hearing has their own range which is made by Oticon, in the US Costco has the Kirkland range which was made by Resound and is now made by Signia. Starkey does its own white label for its retailers.

I personally don't like white label ranges, I understand the commercial reason why they are used but it makes them hard to

analyse for the consumer. That is exactly why a white label is used, to make it difficult to do like for like comparison. It is easy for a Dispenser to say oh they are the same as such and such, more often than not, they aren't.

They may be made by the same manufacturer but how are you to know exactly what they are? The information is never really forthcoming, maybe it is my natural sense of suspicion, but why do they need to hide the brand name in the first place?

You can probably see why it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information that you need to consider. That information is both medical and technical in nature, medical when it comes to your hearing loss and technical when you are trying to understand any hearing aid technology that has been recommended.

There is a lot of choice in both types of hearing aid available, and the manufacturers who make them. It can be quite difficult for a consumer to understand it all and sort through what is important. A good Dispenser will help you on that journey, deciphering the gobbledygook. So let's look at the experience of buying a hearing aid, what should happen and why.

The Hearing Test

The quality and comprehensiveness of the hearing test is important. You should get a complete hearing test undertaken by a qualified professional. There are many test that can be undertaken, the benefit delivered of different test procedures like speech audiometry and speech in noise testing to the eventual fit of a hearing aid was once debatable.

However, with recent changes in hearing aids and understanding of hearing loss the more in-depth the test is, the better the recommendation and eventual fit. Information derived from speech testing and speech in noise testing in particular is very valuable in understanding which hearing aid is best for you.

This information can also be incorporated in the fitting of the hearing aid delivering a better personalisation for you. Ideally audiological tests should be done in a soundproof booth for complete accuracy, or at a stretch a very quiet room.

The consultation should also incorporate more than just testing procedures. To understand your hearing needs, an Audiologist should discuss your medical history, lifestyle needs and the issues you are having. After the test is finished the Audiologist should explain to you the severity of your hearing loss and what type of loss it is.

At this point they should be able to recommend to you which kind of hearing aids and which technology level will work best for you, your lifestyle needs and your loss. Let's take a look at the hearing test and the different processes.

The hearing test appointment will usually last between one and one and a half hours. The test is made up of several different overall parts that allow a professional to understand the full background to any hearing loss. Any medical issues pertaining to your hearing and then your ability to hear.

Each part of the process is designed to furnish different information that is then used to make recommendations. Each part of the process has a certain value and will shape the recommendations made. After the hearing test is complete, the professional will explain clearly what he or she has found and will make recommendations on those findings.

What happens during the hearing test?

Generally the hearing test no matter where you get it, will follow the same pattern with similar components. Components within the overall parts may differ based on who is providing the test and the results they are getting. For instance, some professionals may not undertake speech in noise tests at all, and middle ear testing may not be undertaken unless something points to it being specifically

required. Having said all of that, the hearing test will usually include:

Examination of the ear and auditory canal, including video otoscopy

Case history

Full audiometric hearing assessment that will include pure tone testing, middle ear testing and possibly speech testing in quiet and noise.

Explanation and discussion of outcome

Impartial advice on the most suited hearing system for your individual requirements

Let's talk about those stages in more depth.

Otoscopy (Examination of the ear)

This part of the assessment is about the health of your ear, your outer ear and your ear canal. The professional will first examine the outside of your ear using a light. They are looking for any blemishes, strange marks or sore spots. They will then use an instrument called an otoscope to examine your ear canal and your tympanic membrane (ear drum).

This again is to check the health of your canal and ear drum. They will check something called the light response on the ear drum, this is simply the way the light is reflected on the drum. A healthy tympanic membrane will reflect the light in a specific way. This examination may also give indications of problems with your middle ear and indications of any history of perforations.

It also allows a professional to become a little familiar with your ear canal. Each ear canal is different, different sizes, different bends. Once the professional is happy, they will move onto the next part.

Case History

A case history is taken to get an understanding of the background of your hearing loss. During the case history you will be asked typical questions such as your name, address and date of birth. They will ask you about any treatments in the past that may have used ototoxic drugs (medicines that are toxic and damage hearing).

Then the professional will ask you questions about any background to the hearing loss, such as your working history, when you noted an issue, if the issue occurred suddenly, has it worsened suddenly, do you have tinnitus, if so is it in only one ear etc.

These last few questions are designed to allow the professional to assess if you have what is called a referable condition. If they find this to be so, they may well continue the test but will refer you on for further examination by an ENT professional. Once this is done the professional will also ask you questions about the perception that you have of the impact of your problem on your daily life.

These questions are important because it allows the professional to begin to understand your lifestyle and the impact if any that hearing loss is having on it. Sometimes these questions may seem odd, but to get a good understanding of what is best for you, we need to have a good idea of who you are and what you enjoy doing. After the case history is undertaken, they will move onto the auditory testing proper.

Auditory Testing

Auditory testing is made up of several tests that assess the full function of your auditory system. It is important that the testing is comprehensive, but certain parts of the test may not be needed depending on results from earlier tests.

What happens during auditory testing?

As we said, not all tests may be undertaken, for instance, masking and middle ear analysis may not be needed, however, best practice auditory testing involves the following tests;

Pure tone testing (audiometry)

Masking (audiometry)

Speech in quiet testing

Speech in noise testing

Tympanometry

Acoustic Reflex Threshold testing

Distortion Product Otoacoustic Emissions (DPOAE) testing

Audiometry (Hearing Test)

Audiometry or pure tone testing is a series of tests where pure tones (sound like whistles and chirps) or warble tones (similar but they oscillate or vary) are presented through either headphones, insert earphones or a bone conduction head band. It is important that both air conduction (through headphones) and bone conduction (through bone conduction headband) are both undertaken.

Air conduction audiometry tells us what you can hear from the outside in, bone conduction audiometry tells us what your best inner ear can hear in isolation. This is important, because sometimes there can be a difference and this is the clearest method to identify if you have either sensorineural or conductive hearing loss or indeed a mixture of both.

The results are plotted on an audiogram which shows your hearing sensitivity in the tested frequencies. These tests tell us the softest sound that you can hear and allows us to tell you if your hearing sensitivity is within normal range, or if there is a hearing loss.

Audiometry results tell us many things beyond just your hearing sensitivity, it allows us to see if there is any asymmetry in your hearing loss (hearing sensitivity that is not equal between the two ears). It also allows to see the configuration of your hearing loss (the shape of the way your hearing loss occurs tell us a lot about

your hearing loss causes). This and other tests can help towards a diagnosis of ear abnormalities.

How is audiometry performed?

The initial test involves you carefully listening through headphones (air conduction) that are placed over the ears or insert earphones that are placed in the ear canals. Pure tones will be presented through the headphones or insert earphones. This part of the test is called air conduction testing and is designed to allow the professional to assess what you can hear from the outer ear.

If you hear the sound, you will push a button or raise your hand in response. The professional will continuously reduce the volume of the sound until you can no longer hear it. The key here is that the professional is trying to identify the softest sound you can hear, so no matter how soft it is, if you think you hear it you should push the button. Many people are never sure and feel like they are letting down the professional.

This couldn't be further than the truth, just relax and don't get frustrated. Once the headphone or earphone test is undertaken, the professional will then change to a bone conduction vibrator on a headband that is placed behind the ear. This part of the test is designed to find out what your inner ear can hear, it is very rarely different but in cases of conductive hearing loss there will be a marked difference.

This part of the test is important, conductive hearing loss is a referable condition if you have never been aware of it before. Even if you know about it and it has been assessed by an ENT, the results are still important for the programming of any hearing aids that may be prescribed.

This overall test will determine your hearing thresholds and would normally be the end of the audiometry testing. However, just occasionally the results will point us to undertake advanced audiometry. This is where we earn our money!

Additional tests called masking may be added to the group of tests if an asymmetry of thresholds is found or if you have conductive hearing loss. Masking is very important and there are clear rules when a professional needs to do it. Masking is designed to keep one ear busy, while the other is tested. In essence it is only undertaken where we do not trust our original results.

As I said, there are clear rules on when we should mask and when we should not trust results. You will know masking because the professional will play a white noise type sound in one ear which they will tell you to ignore while they ask you to respond to the normal beeps or whistles in the other.

Speech Testing

Words will be presented at a comfortable listening level either free field which is presented through a calibrated speaker, or through headphones. You will have to repeat the words and the professional will score you on the results. This test gives the professional a deeper understanding of how you hear speech, it also identifies the speech sounds you are missing.

The test will then be undertaken with increasing levels of background noise. This test is an important part of the assessment, it will give the professional a lot of information about how you perceive speech and the signal to noise ratio you need to hear and understand speech in noise.

These types of tests have always been done, however, in the last few years speech in noise tests have become more helpful to us. A test like Quick SIN allows us to understand the signal to noise ratio that you will need to hear speech well in noise.

Why is it important?

The level of sound you hear is only a starting point for our understanding of the impact of your hearing loss. This just tells us the mechanics of the sound levels. Speech testing actually allows us

to understand how well the brain centres that manage hearing are working.

It is often the case that speech scores can be radically different between two people, even if the audiogram results are the same. The speech in noise testing also allows us to understand exactly what type of hearing aid technology level is most suitable for your hearing loss. For best diagnosis and hearing aid recommendation, the speech testing protocol has become a must.

How is speech testing performed?

Most independent hearing health professionals have updated their testing equipment to allow them to run automated speech and speech in noise tests through their audiometer. During these tests you will be asked to repeat words that are presented to you at normal speech volume levels with and without noise.

Word recognition scores will be determined and recorded on their system. The Quick SIN test will give a signal to noise ratio score which will give a professional a clear idea about the hearing devices that will help you in noise.

Middle Ear Analysis

What is middle ear analysis?

Middle ear analysis tests are undertaken to assess the function of the middle ear. The tests will assess how sound travels through your middle ear and also how your brain reacts to some sounds. You will feel a short blocked sensation while a recording takes place.

These tests are not necessarily important, they only become important if there is a clear need for them. So if I have identified that there is some sort of mid ear issue, Tympanometry will help me understand what that issue might be.

Tympanometry itself will not have any bearing on the hearing aid that is fitted, the audiometric results will. There are two parts to the Middle Ear Assessment: Tympanometry and Acoustic Reflexes.

Tympanometry

What is tympanometry?

It consists of measuring how much your eardrums are moving and if that movement is within normal limits. It tells us if there is any fluid or congestion behind the eardrums. (presence of fluid behind one's eardrums is known as glue ear, and it is very common in children).

This test measures how well your middle ear works. Your middle ear includes your ear drum, the middle ear bones, and your Eustachian tube. It will reveal abnormalities which will signify and can explain a conductive hearing loss and/or a sensation of pressure in the ear.

How is tympanometry performed?

An ear tip is placed in the canal that is connected to a handheld machine, it briefly varies the pressure in the ear. By varying the pressure, the movement of the eardrum can be measured. It takes only a few minutes to complete. You will not need to respond during this test.

Acoustic Reflex Thresholds

What is acoustic reflex threshold testing?

When we hear a loud noise, our ear protects itself with a reflex which stiffens the eardrum. We use this reflex to test the Facial and Auditory nerves. This test measures how the stapedius muscle contracts in response to a loud sound. The absence or presence of acoustic reflexes can be important for differential diagnosis.

How is acoustic reflex threshold testing performed?

Often, tympanometry and acoustic reflex thresholds are done together. With the ear tip in your canal, you will hear beeps that are progressively louder. You will not need to respond. Instead, the machine will automatically measure the response.

Distortion Product Oto-acoustic Emissions (DPOAE)

What is DPOAE testing?

This test measures how well the outer hair cells in the cochlear work. The outer hair cells produce low-level sounds called Otoacoustic Emissions in response to clicks. A conductive or sensorineural hearing loss will often result in absent DPOAE responses.

How is DPOAE testing performed?

With an ear tip in the canal, clicks are presented in the ear. In response, the cochlear emits a sound which is recorded by the equipment. The extent of the response and the frequency at which the response occurs is measured and recorded.

Explanation of the results

Once the testing is complete, the professional will explain the results, they will explain exactly what they have found and detail why it is having the impact it is on your life. They will also make recommendations based on their results in order for you to return to a more normal level of hearing and allow you to engage fully in your life.

Hearing Aid Benefit Assessment

If you are a suitable candidate for hearing aids, many professionals will then move onto a hearing aid benefit assessment or demonstration. In essence what they will do is programme up a set of demo hearing aids to your loss, they will not give you full amplification but a level close to it. This will allow you a taste of what hearing aids sound like and how they will work. Any professional worth their salt will move through a demonstration of

different features explaining to you as they go what they are and how they will work for you.

Go To The Test Accompanied

You should always take someone with you to your hearing test, undergoing any kind of medical examination or procedure can be a stressful. It is always a good idea to take someone with you to a medical appointment. Whilst caught up in the process and worrying about results, it is easy to miss other important information. If you have someone with you they can help to remember what was said. It is always better to have two people in order that as much information as possible is retained.

Make notes during the appointment and don't be nervous about asking questions. Query anything that you do not fully understand. Conversely, don't be afraid to ask the Audiologist to write something down for you. A true professional will not be put out by being asked questions, these questions will come up, it is better to ask them at the appointment. As a professional we understand that this experience is new to you and the information is foreign.

We also understand it is our job to help you understand.

The Hearing Aids

If a set of hearing instruments is recommended to you, don't be afraid to ask the professional to write the details down for you if you wish to research them. As I said some companies may offer white label instruments, these are instruments that are re-named by the manufacturers specifically for the company you are dealing with. If you are being offered something like that, ask exactly what the instrument is based on and from what manufacturer.

Don't be nervous about asking questions, ask about the different kinds of hearing aid available which are suitable for your type of hearing loss. Ask why the particular hearing aids have been recommended. As I said, a professional will not be put off by any

questions. Don't be afraid to say that you would like to research the hearing aids that have been recommended to you.

On Hearing Aid Know we offer a decent high level view of most hearing aids to give a good understanding of what they will do for you. My friend Abram Bailey runs a website called Hearing Tracker, it can be found at

www.hearingtracker.com

The site offers run downs of both hearing providers and hearing aids in the US, it also has consumer reviews of both. It is a pretty good place to get an idea about the effectiveness of both the hearing aids and the providers who are listed.

Hearing Aids, Have Realistic Expectations

You need to have realistic expectations of the hearing aid technology you buy and what it can deliver for you. Modern hearing aids are exceptional pieces of technology, but they are not, nor probably will never be, a replacement for normal hearing.

The higher the technology level of the hearing aid, the better the results for you. Keep this clearly in mind when you are making any purchase decision. Don't buy low technology hearing aids and expect them to help you in all situations, they simply won't.

Knowing What You Want Helps

Before you decide what to buy, have a clear idea about what you want from your hearing aids. Think carefully about your problem situations, consider where solving those problems are important for you. If you keep that clear you can consider what type of technology level will be best for you.

If you have a sedentary lifestyle and all you want hearing aids for is listening to TV and Radio, some light conversation and the occasional journey to the shop. Low end technology should almost certainly meet all your needs.

However, if you have a busier lifestyle and your hearing aids will be imperative for more complex sound situations, then higher levels of technology are most certainly for you. Key to any decision is the understanding of your needs and realistic expectations of the technology level of hearing aids that you will buy.

With this in mind you will know what you can expect from what you can afford. When this is clear to you, it will make your journey with your hearing aids less stressful for you. It is the Dispenser's job to make this clear to you and they often will, however, you need to really listen.

It isn't a sales technique, they aren't trying to up-sell you, more often than not they are simply giving the best advice possible. It is up to you to decide what you get within your budget, just be clear about what that will deliver to you.

Wireless Accessories

In recent years most hearing aid manufacturers have moved towards wireless communication within their hearing aids. This connectivity has opened up new options and resulted in new accessory devices that deliver real benefits for hearing aid users. There are many additional extras that can now be purchased with your hearing aids. These are all useful add ons which can help someone with hearing loss to lead the life that they are used to.

As with many things though, they are only useful if you actually are going to use them. Each manufacturer will offer some wireless solution, the question is do you need them? These can really increase your costs so think carefully before buying. Don't pay for something which you might not use very often or pay for something you don't really need.

However, having said that, if you are constrained by budget for the technology level that you can afford. An accessory can help to make up on what you are missing. For instance, a wireless remote microphone can really deliver fantastic results for hearing in noise

even when paired with a low technology hearing aid. Keep this in mind when you are making the buying decision.

Be Sure Of What Are You Buying

So you have made the decision to buy, you have picked out the aids and the accessory you want. You need to be sure about what you are actually buying. Ask the seller to explain in detail what you are actually buying, if they say lifetime aftercare, ask exactly what does that mean?

The life of the hearing aid, a set period of time, your lifetime? What does that aftercare include, are there structured call backs, will you drop back when you have a problem, or alternatively will they just call you for a re-test in five years?

These are all things that you really need to know, I have said it before, hearing aids are complex devices that need care and attention to deliver to their best ability. Hearing problems are not like vision problems, hearing aids are not like glasses, you don't put them on and everything will be fine.

You need support and rehabilitation and that support needs to be ongoing. So it is important that you clearly understand what you are buying when you pay your money. What aftercare and help will you get.

General Considerations

When choosing the size and shape of an aid, an important consideration is your dexterity. You may find that smaller hearing aids are difficult for you to handle and insert. Not just that, the battery that powers it, may be too small for you to handle. If your sight is not great, you may also have issues with the size of the aid or the battery.

Always remember, you are a customer as well as a Patient, if you feel that you want to try something different or go away and think about it, then do so. I have mentioned aftercare already, but it is imperative that you understand what you are buying.

Find out about aftercare and warranty servicing of your hearing aids. They are an expensive investment and you should always check exactly what is included in the warranty and aftercare service.

Make Sure You Have A Written Agreement

Finally, make sure you have a written agreement, then you always have a reference to the agreement you have made. I sincerely hope that this advice will allow you to make educated hearing healthcare decisions. Find a company that you feel comfortable with, ask them lots of questions about the hearing aids that they offer, what they think would be best for you and what exactly is their service offering and you should never go wrong.

Better Hearing, an organisation in the States offers an excellent run down on buying hearing aids. It can be found here:

<http://www.betterhearing.org/hearingpedia/hearing-aids/guide-buying-hearing-aids>

Fitting The Hearing Aid

So we have covered the hearing test and making your decision about buying hearing aids. Let's talk about the initial fit of the hearing aids and the aftercare. Firstly let's look at the actual fitting of your new hearing aid devices, what do you need to consider and what information should be given to you?

The Fitting

The fitting itself is a relatively short exercise, the professional will place the hearing aids on and programme them to your hearing loss. We would undertake some tests in relation to how you are hearing and verify that they are delivering against the targets that have been set. The initial prescription level will often not be the optimum prescription. This is in order that the hearing aids do not overwhelm you. You will need to acclimatise to them and this will happen over time.

However, generally we would programme the hearing aids to automatically increase the prescription gently to move you towards the optimum prescription over a period of time. This is called automatic acclimatisation and it is something that is done slowly, in fact you will barely notice that the amplification is changing as you wear them.

Getting Comfortable With Your Hearing Aids

We try to ensure that you are fully comfortable with your hearing aids. When we say comfortable, we don't just mean physically. You need to be comfortable not just wearing your hearing aids but also handling them. In relation to physical comfort, you will be wearing your hearing aids every day, all day. Initially they will feel odd, in particular if you are a first time user. However, that should settle down very quickly.

We will make sure that you are able to insert the hearing aids in, or on, your ears by yourself. We will also ensure that you can take them out with ease. It is important that you can handle your hearing aids with ease and confidence, otherwise they will not fulfill their purpose as solutions to deliver you a better life.

The Batteries

We will show you what batteries you need and how to put the batteries into your hearing aid. It is important that we assess that you can manage the batteries by yourself. We will make sure that you can both handle them and put them in by yourself, we will also give you information on where you can buy batteries, how much they cost, and why it is a good idea to keep spare batteries handy.

Controls On Your Hearing Aids

If your hearing aids have any controls, we will show you how to use them and what they do. You should make sure that you can operate all of the hearing aid controls yourself, and change the listening programmes if in fact there is any. It is important that we assess

whether you have the dexterity to operate the controls for your hearing aid. If your hearing aid is supplied with a remote we will show you how to use it.

Cleaning & Caring For Your Hearing Aids

We will show you how to clean and care for your hearing aid. Hearing aids are a big investment, taking good care of them makes real financial sense. We will talk about keeping earwax out of the sound bore and changing wax guards if your hearing aid has them. We will also talk about daily cleaning routines and using a dehumidifier box as part of your care routine.

Proper care and maintenance of your hearing aid is important, it will ensure that it continues to help you hear better for longer. At the initial fitting this will just be a quick run through, we don't want to overload you with information. We will ask you to read the owner's manual and at further appointments we will ensure that you can clean and care for the devices.

Assistive Listening and Alerting Devices

A hearing aid may not be the whole answer for you, in certain cases there may be some assistive devices that make sense for you and your lifestyle. Most hearing aid manufacturers have released their own wireless devices for hearing aids.

However, there are many more available from non-hearing aid manufacturers like smoke detectors and amplified phones. We will always give you information regarding assistive listening technology such as the tele coil, mobile phone technology, how best to use phones etc.

The Follow Up Visit

Your first follow up visit is an important time for you and us. We want to know how you have been doing and how the hearing devices worked for you. We will ask you about your listening experiences with the devices and how you have been wearing

them. You should be prepared to give us an update on how you have got on in all the different listening situations you have been in.

The questions we ask will cover how you did in noise, your perception of loudness, clarity, any discomfort, etc. Tell us everything, we really want to know, we want to know how you got on. It is worthwhile for you to keep a notebook or diary during the early period so that you can keep track of how you are getting on. This can be invaluable for us because the information is written down as it happens.

Fine Tuning

It is not unusual for fine tuning of your hearing aids to be needed, as I said, sound is a very personal sense, think of music. To one person rock is sweet music indeed, but to another it is racket. In the same manner, what is right for one person with hearing loss may often be wrong for others. During this time you will also be becoming accustomed to the hearing aids, this takes some time. Again, the time it takes differs from one to the other.

It may also take some time for you to get the best out of your hearing devices. While we restore normal levels of hearing, it takes the processing centres of the brain some time to adjust. It takes time for your brain to sort out this new sound information. This period is called the rehabilitation period, while initial improvements happen quickly, full rehabilitation can take up to a year.

Reinforcement of Information

At this visit we will also take the opportunity to reinforce all of the information we have already given you. We will again discuss the hearing aids and their functions, and talk about your clean and care routine.

Ask Your Questions

You will probably have many questions of your own at this stage, make sure you ask them. We have given you a large amount of

information during your earlier visits. If any of it is still unclear to you, ask us to go over it again. Since your fitting, you may have new questions. We try our best to cover all of the information you need to know and to make sure you understand.

However, even we forget things from time to time, so ask any questions and that you think you need an answer to. If you need it written down, ask us to do that as well.

Hearing Aid Pricing

In the last edition of this book I stayed away from hearing aid pricing, mainly because it made no real sense to talk about it because it varied dramatically across the world. I still am not going to speak about individual prices here, because I simply don't know what they are individually. However, I am going to try and explain in detail how my pricing is reached and why it might differ dramatically across organisations.

What Goes Into The Price?

The retail cost of a hearing aid is based on similar factors across every organisation. The cost of the device to the retailer and the cost of delivering the device to you plus profit. It is a relatively simple equation or matrix. If you were to just judge the cost of hearing aids at retail level against the cost at wholesale level you would consider the difference extortionate.

However, it isn't a simple mark up, you aren't just buying a product, you are buying a product and a level of service which includes multiple visits. That service is supplied by a professional who sets a price on his or her time and experience. I am one of those professionals, I think my time, experience and knack for making hearing aids dance is worth money.

Let's break down the price

Cost of devices (varies by technology level obviously and by any agreed discount levels)

The hearing test itself which is at least one hour (this is often free, but if you buy the hearing aids it is kind of bundled into the price)

The fitting of the hearing aids, an appointment which usually takes at least thirty minutes if not more.

Initial follow up visits, I like to do at least two during the first month. If at the second follow up visit I am not happy with the progress, I will schedule at least one more for two weeks later.

Ongoing service calls, there is some debate about how often this should happen, many feel calling you back once a year is enough, I generally like to see my customers every six months. It is debatable if it is needed, but I like to do it. It makes me feel comfortable that I am heading off any problems before they really happen. These ongoing call backs will continue until the hearing aids die which will be for at least eight to ten years probably.

Occasional drop in visits, Geoff they stopped working, you forgot to change your wax guards, oh yes sorry about that, how are the kids? Happens all the time, sometimes it isn't just wax guards.

Not justification, just information

I am not trying to justify prices here, I am simply trying to explain what goes into my assessment of price. I personally will probably spend at least twenty hours with a customer during the lifetime of an aid, I think my time and expertise is worth money. It is as simple as that.

I also have business expenses to cover, light heat, a receptionist, equipment costs rent and rates etc... These things all effect the price I set for hearing aids, is my retail price the same as others? Maybe, maybe not, however, I feel that the price I charge is commensurate with the level of care attention and experience I provide.

The key here is that I have carefully made you aware of what I provide for the price I will charge. So you are very clear about what you are getting for the price I charge. What you need to understand is that what I offer, may not be replicated by another provider. That is your job to both understand and assess.

Will a corporate business or another independent dispenser supply you with the same level of care and attention? Will their Dispenser

have the same professional experience and expertise? If the answer is yes, well then you are assessing like for like.

There has been much talk about the greed of professionals, in particular in the United States. I can't comment on it because again, I don't know what the prices are or what the price includes. I also don't know what a professional considers a good hourly rate is over there.

If you are in the United States and looking for hearing aids, I think you can probably make a better assessment of that. The key learning I want to pass to you here is to understand what the price you pay includes, because if you understand that implicitly, you will be able to make an educated assessment of the benefit to cost ratio.

The last thing I will say is that just because it is cheaper, doesn't mean it is the same. Always understand the wider picture and be sure of exactly what you are getting for the prices you are paying. Always make sure you get it in writing.

Changing prices internationally

Hearing aid prices have been changing internationally over the last few years. There is a downward pressure on prices across the world that is mainly driven by low price sellers. In essence, many of these are internet based sellers that actually have no staff. What they do is generate leads that they pass onto private practices. The private practice is then forced to either sell the devices that you are interested in at the price dictated or they switch sell you to something else.

Many national businesses have also reduced their pricing based on the model that they are delivering. For instance some in the UK and Ireland probably have some of the lowest pricing available. That pricing is realised through their business model, which in essence is conveyor belt. Get em in, get them fitted, see them when you can.

I don't agree with that business model, but hey, it works for them and there are plenty of people who buy from them. Do those people buy from them a second time? Of that I am not sure, but I regularly have their customers come to me for help. I generally tell them to go back and demand help, that is what they paid for.

Experienced users of hearing aids tend not to base their buying decisions on price, although of course price is a factor. Experienced users are focused on service and care while new users with little experience focus solely on price. This fact and the pricing of others has led to reducing hearing aid prices overall.

A good thing and a bad thing

For the consumer this has to be seen as a good thing right? Well yes and maybe no, but let me explain. There was definitely room to reduce prices, however, I think that providers also need to be careful. If we reduce our prices so much that it makes no financial sense. The consumer is the one that will suffer. I said it earlier, just because it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, doesn't mean it is the same duck!

It is a simple equation, if my price does not cover service, I either don't give it or I go out of business. It really is as simple as that. I think the death of Independent hearing healthcare providers would be a very bad thing for the consumer generally. Independents really do tend to act as checks and balances on the system. So, how can I address the downward pressure on prices but also make sure that the prices I charge make financial sense for my business and the consumers I serve?

Unbundled pricing

For many years there has been some debate within the profession about unbundling the pricing. By that I mean clearly setting out the price of the hearing aid and the price portion of the service and care. While some, particularly in the states, have gone down that route it is by no means wide spread. I think it is a great idea, because it implicitly informs a consumer what they are buying.

It could also open up the pricing arrangements, for instance say you didn't think that you would need any more than one check-up a year because you are a confident, experienced user. I think I would be willing to deduct the costs of the extra check-up and set a cost with you for any incidental appointments that arose.

There are some problems with using a system like this in the UK and Ireland because of the V.A.T. implications. It would mean that hearing health providers who went down that route would have to begin to charge value added tax for the services they implicitly provide. It is something that we would have to consider.

For me, I think that is a winner for both of us, you get a deduction and I am still covered for my time. I don't know how others in the industry feel about that and I am not sure how you feel about that, but I think it is something worth exploring. That is my personal opinion folks, for what it is worth, I don't know how others within the business feel.