

High Cost of Hearing Aids

Consumers are at the mercy of manufacturer-owned retailers and such retail outlets put the focus on sales, to the detriment of aural rehabilitation services.

- In Canada, the market for hearing aids is dominated by six, very large, foreign companies: Starkey (U.S.A.), Sonova (Switzerland), Siemens (now called Sivantos, Germany) as well as GN ReSound, Widex, and William Demant Holding (all three, Denmark).
- While the cost of hearing aids varies, they are generally considered to be expensive, often costing thousands of dollars and having a useful life of about 3 to 5 years, which means they need to be replaced regularly.
- It is interesting to note that hearing examinations are not covered under the Public Service Health Care Plan (PSHCP) while eye examinations are covered every two calendar years.
- Under the PSHCP, the purchase and repair of eyeglasses/contact lenses is covered up to \$275 every two calendar years, while expenses for the purchase/repairs of hearing aids are covered up to \$1,000 every 60 months (five years).
- Given that hearing difficulties can cause a range of problems in relation to communication and safety, for example, as well as psychological ones, it would seem to be important and useful to detect and assess such difficulties.

Recent Developments in the U.S.:

- In the United States, there is currently a strong movement and support from organizations such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that advocates for those living with hearing loss to allow hearing devices (such as personal amplification devices like the RCA Symphonix, the HearPal, Able Planet, and others) that are not labelled as hearing aids to be sold over-the-counter or on the Internet.
- This would have a substantial impact on the audiology profession in terms of monopoly on the sale of hearing devices, as well as on other services such as the provision of audiological exams, and the sale of assistive listening devices
- There is a need to keep abreast of developments in the U.S. and to plan for any effects that may be felt in the Canadian market as a result of changes in the U.S. In part, this is to avoid a situation where U.S. residents have access to better-priced hearing devices than those that are available to Canadians from hearing aid companies.
- Opening up of the market for hearing devices is expected to bring the cost of hearing devices down, which is what CHHA, other organizations involved with those who live with hearing loss, and people who have a hearing loss have desired for some time.

Background information on hearing aids

- All hearing aids are a benefit to the hard of hearing when properly fitted and adjusted by the hearing aid care provider

- In most cases, the best a hearing aid can do is to get back 60% of the lost hearing
- Hearing aids work well up to a distance of about 1.5 meters only
- Hearing aids are ineffective in public areas as all sound are picked up and amplified resulting in decreased speech intelligibility
- Many hard of hearing citizens will not attend church, go to theatres, attend public presentations and are isolated as hearing in public is very difficult and many times impossible.

Assistive listening devices are required to eliminate back ground noise or what is termed clutter

CHHA Position

- Establish legislative/policy changes that shift care from the sole focus on hearing aids to a focus on a holistic approach to treating the person and their hearing loss.
- To improve affordability of hearing health care by actions across federal, provincial, and private sectors.
- To legislate greater transparency in the pricing of hearing aids and a comparison between technology offered by the various manufacturers. This is beneficial to consumers and clinicians with better –informed clients able to choose the product that meets their lifestyles.

Move toward the stance adopted by the U.S.. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) by enabling legislation so that assistive devices not called hearing aids will become available in Canada as they will in the United States. At a minimum, Canada should actively monitor the legislative and regulatory situation in the U.S. and be ready to act so as not to put Canadians living with a hearing loss at a disadvantage.