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From the Executive Director's Desk

HLAA Encourages Transparency of Hearing Aid Pricing

HHLAA's "Campaign to Make Hearing Aids Affordable" is an attempt to find ways to encourage and make it possible for more people to get treatment for their hearing loss and do it much earlier. These days there is no reason to put up with not hearing well. There are more and better options—both in technology and services—than ever.

However, while 95 percent of people with hearing loss could successfully be treated with hearing aids, only 22 percent currently use them according to MarkeTrak report. And, 68 percent of people with hearing loss cite financial constraints as a core reason they do not use hearing aids.

This campaign has several components because HLAA believes there is no "one way" to get more people to seek treatment for their hearing loss. We are focusing on the following:

- Increasing awareness about hearing loss and reducing stigma
- Advocating for unbundling of hearing aids and professional services
- Supporting low-cost options for consumers
- Advocating for insurance coverage and tax relief in the states
- Supporting the Hearing Aid Tax Credit legislation H.R. 1479 and S. 905
- Creating an opportunity on our website for consumers to rate the hearing health services they receive and comment on their hearing aids

My comments here are on one aspect of our campaign—encouraging transparency of pricing. In most professional practices today the cost of a hearing aid is bundled with costs for the professional services of the hearing health care provider including follow-up visits for hearing aid adjustment and counseling in successful hearing aid use. HLAA is calling for a cost breakdown so that consumers know what the device costs and what they are paying for the services. Going even further would be a "pay-as-you-go" model currently being used successfully in two clinics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Paying for services of the professional and the device separately has several positive effects that benefit consumers:

- It starts an important dialog between consumers and hearing health providers.
- It takes the focus away from the device as the answer
- It sets up more realistic expectations of what the device can and cannot do
- It "brands" the professional services of the hearing health provider placing value on those services and the need for them
- It reveals the need for a rehabilitation program of which the device is just one, though important, part
- You get what you pay for and need and no one patient is subsidizing another
- It may be easier for the consumer to pay smaller amounts gradually than one large amount up-front.
- The consumer can know exactly what they are paying for and how it all fits together in their effort to hear better—hearing test, device, earmold, functional communication and lifestyle assessment, programming and testing of the hearing aid, counseling during the trial or evaluation period, follow-up visits for tweaking, and group rehabilitation sessions, when available.

To learn more about unbundling and an unbundling model that has been used successfully over the past six years, we have asked Stephanie Sjoblad, Au.D., clinic director, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), Division of Speech and Hearing Sciences, to write an article for the next issue of *Hearing Loss Magazine* to explain how it works in her clinic. One indicator of the success of the UNC model is that their hearing aid return rate over a six-year period is less than one percent. Compare that to an annual national return/exchange rate between 17.5 percent and 18.5 percent reported in studies by Strom. We can conclude that UNC is doing something right. ■■■■



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