

Partnering for Best Practices in Hearing Care

The majority of advertising on the web, in-print publications, and on the radio and TV devalues the importance of proper hearing evaluation, needs assessment, counseling and over-emphasizes discounts and promotions—and promises miraculous results with hearing aids only. Many of these practices can get away with providing a lower standard of care because consumers are focused on the wrong thing—the hearing aid—and they are not as educated (like HLAA members are) about what clinical services they should expect and demand.

As an audiologist and consumer advocate, my personal pet peeve is advertisements for “free hearing tests” or “free hearing screenings.” First, there is a big difference between a hearing test and a screening. A comprehensive audiological evaluation should be done before any technology is recommended. Second, these so-called free tests are really not free as the time it takes to complete them is usually bundled into the cost of the hearing aids. It makes much more sense for consumers to determine just how comprehensive the testing really is and what it would cost if it were separated from the cost of the technology so that its true value can be discerned.

As I discussed in my article “Best Practices in Hearing Enhancement” in the July/August 2015 issue of *Hearing Loss Magazine*, there are certain things a consumer should look for when selecting an audiologist. While you are encouraged to review the article, in a nutshell the audiologist should perform:

Best practices and patient-centered care are the latest buzzwords in the hearing health care industry—and for good reason. For too many years, the hearing health care industry has focused on hearing aids as the solution to hearing loss. The idea that hearing aids are just one aspect of a carefully conceived comprehensive strategic plan for improving a person’s ability to hear has been lost in product-based advertising campaigns suggested by the hearing aid manufacturers and adopted by many audiologists and hearing aid specialists for many years.

- A comprehensive hearing evaluation to rule out any concomitant medical issues and to determine the type, degree and shape (configuration) of hearing loss
- Speech-in-noise testing to determine certain hearing aid features (such as directional microphones) and accessories (such as wireless remote microphones) that might be needed to improve hearing and understanding at a distance, in noise and in reverberation
- A comprehensive needs assessment to determine what technologies (hearing aids, Hearing Assistive Technology [HAT], etc.) and other strategies are needed to meet the patient’s communication needs at

home, in the workplace, at school, and in the community

- Real-ear testing to verify that the hearing aid fitting meets target
- Validate the fitting via outcome measures

How Do You Find the Right Audiologist?

It’s one thing to know what services the audiologist should provide but how do you find an audiologist who uses these methods? It’s not that easy to do as the profession of audiology has not standardized its training of new generations of audiologists. It is a rare graduate program that has an entire course in holistic needs assessment and the employment of technologies beyond hearing aids.

The data speaks. In 2011 at the American Auditory Society meeting in Scottsdale, Arizona, I presented the results of an investigation carried out by myself and one of my doctoral students at Gallaudet University, Erin Beckman (Beckman, E. and Compton-Conley, C. 2011). We found that out of almost 300 audiologists who had graduated between 2005 and 2009, 72 percent reported that they received inadequate to no training in needs assessment and fitting techniques for HAT. We also found a significant positive relationship between the adequacy of needs assessment training and the frequency of Hearing Assistive Technology (HAT) recommendations.

In addition, the majority of audiologists agreed that they would

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recommend HAT more often if they had learned more about it in graduate school. The profession of audiology knows this is an issue that needs to be fixed. But fixing it requires all 75 audiology programs to revamp their curriculums. Getting everyone on the same page is a huge task and will take time. But consumers don't have the time. They need answers now.

Hearing Tracker

Enter Hearing Tracker. In 2014, while walking through the Exhibit Hall at the HAAA Convention in Austin, Texas, I came across a booth being manned by a young man named Abram Bailey, Au.D. Dr. Bailey is the founder and president of Hearing Tracker. After exchanging pleasantries and finding out that we both graduated from Vanderbilt University, he gave me a tour of the hearingtracker.com website. Not only does the site offer informative and thought-provoking blogs on hearing enhancement technology, it also provides reviews on hearing aids and has a provider finder. By entering your zip code, you can search for a provider in your area who provides specific services. For example, you can do a search to find someone who fits hearing aids or who works with children, or who recommends HAT or all three.

To be listed on the site, providers must complete a questionnaire that queries them about their specialties. Consumers can then see if the audiologist meets his or her needs and make an appointment. Providers must agree to be rated and reviewed by the patient. Think Angie's List. Pretty cool, right?

This gave me an idea. Why not have HAAA partner with Hearing Tracker to help identify and promote

hearing providers who embrace a more holistic approach to hearing care and to advertise services that HAAA offers? So, Hearing Tracker is in the process of inviting audiologists to opt-in to the free promotional program. They will need to prove that they are considering HAT with every patient, following best practices when implementing HAT solutions, and meeting each person's four needs:

1. face-to-face communication
2. the reception of media
3. telecommunications
4. alerting needs

Currently HAAA and Hearing Tracker, along with Dr. Michael Valente of Washington University, and the audiology staff at Mayo in Arizona are working together to create a comprehensive questionnaire and vetting process for this purpose.

Here's What You Can do to Help

Go to hearingloss.org>Support>Find a Professional

1. Try using Hearing Tracker and if you consult with an audiologist in the database, please be sure to rate and review that provider.
2. If your audiologist is not listed in Hearing Tracker and you think he or she should be, suggest it!
3. Also feel free to send your suggestions to Dr. Bailey at abram@hearingtracker.com.

HAAA is hoping to leverage Hearing Tracker's impressive provider directory, including more than 20,000 audiologists and hearing instrument specialists, to help consumers find

and connect with providers who can consistently provide a high standard of holistic care; and Hearing Tracker will be educating consumers about HAAA's extensive (online and off-line) support network, resources for those with hearing loss, and advocacy projects. **HLM**

Cynthia Compton-Conley, Ph.D. is an audiologist who has had a distinguished career as an educator and consumer advocate. From vacuum tubes to Bluetooth®, she is unquestionably best known for expanding awareness of assistive technology for people with hearing loss. An acclaimed expert in this specialty area, her counsel and advice are sought worldwide. Visit her website at comptonconleyconsulting.com.

My favorite place is my hometown of Annapolis, only minutes from D.C. Annapolis is the capital of Maryland. It's also home to the United States Naval Academy and the Kunta Kinte-Alex Haley Memorial. If you love boating, history, and eating Maryland crabs (!), America's sailing capital is worth a detour!

