



From the Desk of the Registrar

October 2022

Dear Regulated Members,

This month I am turning over a portion of this article to Cheryl Blair, R.Aud., ACSLPA's Audiology Practice Advisor, to discuss an important development in the field of hearing health: Over the counter hearing aids.

Audiology Practice Advisor:

In August 2022 the FDA ruled to define a regulatory category for over the counter (OTC) hearing aids to provide easily accessible and affordable hearing aids to adults who experience mild to moderate hearing loss. These products can be obtained through direct purchase from retail outlets without any requirements for hearing assessment, prescription, or follow up by a hearing health care professional. The degree of an intended user's hearing loss need not be established prior to purchase. It is highly likely that OTC hearing aids will become available in Canada soon.

An important issue to consider is the level of public knowledge regarding these products. The presentation of OTC hearing aids in the media does not make a distinction between them and the digitally programmable hearing aids that are selected and fit based upon hearing evaluation and verified using evidence based best practice. Indeed, OTC hearing aids are portrayed as inexpensive hearing aids that should have been available long before this.

OTC hearing aids are meant to provide some relief from the often-significant challenges of hearing loss including communication and other related health issues, but only if the hearing loss is mild to moderate. One might imagine families, frustrated with trying to effectively communicate with a member with hearing loss or empathetic to the isolation that a loved one is experiencing due to hearing loss, starting to gift OTC hearing aids for birthdays and other occasions. Audiologists are acutely aware of how difficult it can be to successfully adjust hearing aids to an individual's hearing requirements as well as to their subjective expectations. Will OTC hearing aids do the trick, just like that? Of course not.

Hearing aids incorporate highly sophisticated technology that produces exceptional sound quality and flexibility. Professionals know that one size does not fit all in the world of hearing aids and hearing devices. As Speech-Language and Audiology Canada (SAC) indicates, individualization in the programming and fitting of hearing aids is essential to optimizing an individual's hearing ability and achieving the best outcome for communication. Just as SAC advocates for best practice in hearing aid selection, fitting, and verification, ACSLPA's standards of practice require that regulated audiologists use best practice when working with amplification to maximize each client's unique hearing ability and potential.

We know that that only a fraction of adults who could benefit from amplification have been fitted with or use hearing aids. When it comes to OTC hearing aids, the affordability and easy access with no time commitment required could encourage reluctant people to move towards trying amplification. Optimistically, we can hope that these individuals find some benefit in using OTC hearing aids and are left with a desire for better quality and outcomes. As audiologists we can work to ensure that the public understands how that could be achieved and to continue to provide comprehensive quality hearing health care.



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Registrar:

We know that OTCs are almost certainly coming to Alberta because three critical pieces are already in place;

- 1) supply is becoming available from several enthusiastic manufacturers,
- 2) demand from the public/consumer is building, and
- 3) lower health costs and increased individual choice fits with current government priorities.

The only questions really are what role Alberta's audiologists will play in this new retail environment and whether OTC sales will be dominated by pharmacies, discount retailers, and online sites? From the current perspective of the College, there is nothing preventing audiologists from engaging in OTC sales once the devices become available in Alberta. If you have any questions or concerns about the role of audiologists in selling OTCs, please contact Cheryl at audiology@acslpa.ca

Sincerely,



Michael Neth,
Registrar & CEO



Cheryl Blair,
Audiology Practice Advisor, ACSLPA

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