

Sixty Years in the Making

Peter Sydserff | President of the British Society of Hearing Aid Audiologists

Background

The Society (BSHAA) was founded sixty years ago this year and is the Professional Society representing the standards and education of Hearing Aid Dispensers here in the U.K. We also have members from all over the world. I may have already caused confusion by referring to both 'Hearing Aid Audiologist' and 'Hearing Aid Dispenser'; allow me to clarify.

Today all Hearing Aid Dispensers are registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). The HCPC is the regulator set up by the U.K. Government to hold the register and ensure that registrants maintain their standards for their training, professional skills, education and health. Hearing Aid Dispensers are by definition Healthcare Professionals. The title (HAD) is protected in law and you can only use it if you are on the register. This also allows you to carry out the protected function of dispensing hearing aids for retail sale or hire. Again in law, Hearing Aid Dispensers are allowed to describe themselves as 'audiologists' or even 'specialists'.

When the Society was first started in 1954, there was no regulation and no formal route to qualification. 'Hearing Aid Audiologist' seemed like the most appropriate title as it described the assessment for and prescription of hearing aids. The Society of Hearing Aid Audiologists was born and would later add 'British' to its name.

In 1968 the Hearing Aid Council (HAC) was established as the statutory authority for the regulation of hearing aid sales in the U.K. Under the regulation of the HAC, Registered Hearing Aid Dispensers were allowed to refer to themselves as 'Audiologists' in advertising and the printed word as long as it was preceded by the words 'Hearing Aid'. The HAC remained the regulator until its abolition in 2010. The Hampton Review felt that the HAC had run its course and a more up to date form of regulation had already been found with the HCPC. The overarching guidance of the HCPC allows them to hold the register of 16 separate health and social care professions with nearly a third of a million registrants.

Members of BSHAA have retained the use of the title 'Hearing Aid Audiologist' throughout all of this and are also allowed to use the letters M.S.H.A.A. after their name. Those who have attained Fellowship through additional study can use the letters F.S.H.A.A. To be a member of the society, you have to be a Hearing Aid Dispenser registered with the HCPC. The Society also has many associate and student members.

When the Society first started, entry into the profession did not rely on a formal qualification route and many came from the small number of retailers that sold hearing aids door to door at the time. Now, the entry qualification is a foundation degree which can be gained at a number of Higher Education Institutes in the U.K. A healthy number of these are sponsored through this route by established retailers of Hearing Care and Audiologists who have qualified via other routes (typically working in the National Health Service) can also sit a crossover exam allowing for dual qualification.

What does a Hearing Aid Audiologist do?

Simply put; a Hearing Aid Audiologist can prescribe a hearing aid system without medical referral as long as there are no contraindications or conditions which require referral for medical advice. They would then go on to help that client with advice on rehabilitation and ongoing aftercare with the use of that hearing aid system.

In the U.K., everyone is entitled to a hearing aid free at the point of delivery, from the National Health Service (NHS). If a client decides they want to go down this route, then it is their right to do so. 85% of the hearing aids delivered in the U.K. are fitted through this channel making the NHS the largest single provider of hearing aids in the world.

Hearing Aid Audiologists are trained in otoscopy, pure tone audiometry and a variety of outcome and verification tools. Their speciality is adult auditory rehabilitation through the prescription and fitting of hearing aids and predominantly for those with age related hearing loss. Most accept that they cannot be expert in all of the hearing aids systems available in the U.K. market today and will focus on their or their employer's preferred brands.

As part of their Continuing Professional Development (CPD), Hearing Aid Audiologists can record learning about innovations and advances in hearing aid technology and adult audiology as contributing to their CPD profile. This is a biannual record that can be subject to audit by the Regulator, the HCPC.

Finally; Hearing Aid Audiologists are the only Healthcare Professionals with specific legislation governing the sale of hearing aids (i.e. they are the only healthcare professionals who can). Typically the cost of assessment, the recommended hearing system and any associated aftercare is bundled into that charge. The price list will either be handed down to them by an employer and many Hearing Aid Audiologists are successfully self-employed.

Looking Ahead

The U.K. Hearing Care market continues to evolve and therefore so must the professionals who remain at the heart of it. NHS England has now created the opportunity for qualified providers to deliver hearing aids on behalf of the NHS to adults. This means that the lines between public and private are becoming blurred and the challenge to Hearing Healthcare Professionals is to take the opportunity to improve access and outcomes for consumers of Hearing Healthcare.

BSHAA welcomes the opportunity to work with the British Academy of Audiology (BAA), whose members principally work within the NHS and the British Society of Audiology (BSA), the largest Audiology learned society in Europe, to drive up standards and quality of Hearing Healthcare in the U.K.

Exciting times, and as the 'got to' Professional Society for anyone working in the U.K. Hearing Aid Dispensing environment, we look forward to leading and influencing change, rather than just reacting to it.

Peter Sydserff | Dec 2014.

References

<http://www.hcpc-uk.org.uk/aboutus/>

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