

**Practical Problems:
Audiologists As Dispensers**

The Post Graduate Education of a Dispensing Audiologist

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Abstract

Dr. Hetherington describes in his paper the omissions of his formal education to provide him adequate training for private practice as a dispensing audiologist. Recommendations for change are made. A discussion of what may be used for informal post graduate education follows. The areas discussed are professional organizations, journals and seminars.

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As many are aware, I have been dispensing hearing aids as part of a total rehabilitation process for the past four years—long before dispensing was the “in” thing to do. During this period I have found, mostly by trial and error, several considerations both economic and professional that confronted me as an audiologist and as a “for profit” dispenser of hearing instruments.

The first category I would like to consider in the successful management of a private practice is formal education.

My training, both academic and clinical, made the assumption that my future employment would be working for someone else. The program lacked any course work that implied I might have to deal with budget, inventory, read a profit and loss sheet, payroll, taxes, advertising, complying with Federal Drug Administration rulings and many other situations that have come up in the last four years. I have been forced to deal with these problems the best way I can. It is my feeling that it is in these areas (for these reasons) that many of my colleagues fail in private practice. I realize that many of our training programs are now beginning to make some changes in this area but this is not yet enough. The last two audiologists that I hired as dispensers are both recent graduates of two different programs.

One comes from a program that considers itself enlightened in this area. Both individuals are technically competent as clinical audiologists. Both individuals know a great deal about hearing aid evaluation as we teach it in our training programs. However, neither knew anything about hearing aids as they relate to an individual patient nor how to compromise the audiological data to fit the patient's subjective needs. Neither did I. Neither could, at first, take a well fitting earmold impression nor determine which earmold style was appropriate for the patient. Neither could I. Neither could determine whether an aid was defective nor initiate minor repairs of the aid. Neither could I. Most important neither could initially sell their services to prospective patients. Selling, like the term profit, was not considered professional. What a disservice our training programs have provided us. They have taught as well how to be good at what we do, as far as they are willing to go, but not how to make a living with this skill.

It is my experience in this business that makes me wish I had courses in small business administration rather than six hours of doctoral foreign languages. That I had been offered courses in advertising, business law and marketing in place of three courses in introductory speech pathology.

Finally, I wish that I had clinical practicum in the realities of hearing aids, not just how to provide the determination of need and a B & K chart. It is necessary if we are to provide successful entrants into the area of private practice in dispensing hearing aids, that we consider coursework in business management and sales psychology just as important as Introduction to Audiology.

Since I ended my formalized, degreed education with the several deficits I have mentioned, I would like to tell you how I have tried to remedy those deficits. The first remedy has been professional organizations.

There are precious few professional organizations in the United States that actually try to help the dispensing audiologist succeed in his field. That does not imply that there are not a great number of organizations that have the words hearing or audiology in their title. I have personally found three organizations which have not only supported me professionally but have attempted to provide me with relevant information in their meetings. The first one I shall describe is a local organization in Phoenix. The Arizona Association of Private Practitioners in Speech Pathology and Audiology, Inc. was founded by a group of speech pathologists and audiologists who were interested in how to provide better service to the community and their practices. We meet one evening a month to hear both outside speakers and people within the organization. The outside speakers have helped us solve problems that are common to all business organizations.

We have had speakers on such subjects as bookkeeping and accounting practices, business law, taxes, and third party pay-

ment. Specific professional business problems have been brought up and discussed by the people within the organization. Many in the group have faced business situations with which others are just beginning to cope; we help each other.

The community service side of the organization devotes our energies to providing speech and hearing information to the community through a radio program, a telephone information service, and occasional newspaper articles.

The second organization which I feel will help in many different ways is the newly formed Academy of Dispensing Audiologists. This organization, if we can live up to our basic objectives in the bylaws, should be seriously considered by any dispensing audiologist. The objectives of the academy are:

1. Foster the professional dispensing of hearing aids by qualified audiologists in rehabilitative practice.
2. Encourage audiology training programs to include pertinent aspects of hearing aid dispensing in their curricula.
3. Support research in relevant areas of aural rehabilitation.
4. Work cooperatively with individuals and organizations in improving hearing aid dispensing services.
5. Provide guidance for audiologists interested in dispensing hearing aids.

The Academy has in its short lifetime already met in meetings with representatives of the National Hearing Aid Society, the American Council of Otolaryngology, and the Hearing Industry Association in Kansas City, Missouri and Atlanta, Georgia. These meetings have been an attempt to bring each organization understanding of the others position and reach agreement wherever possible.

The first fall meeting of the Academy will be in San Francisco at the time of the American Speech and Hearing Association Convention. These sessions will include a short course on the business aspects of dispensing hearing instruments as part of a complete rehabilitative program. The course content is expected to contain information on everything from costing the services provided to handling the accounts receivable. It is this type of information that is needed to help overcome our profession's lack of business knowledge that many other professions teach in their training programs. Future programs are to include seminars on hearing instruments from the practical, everyday point of view. Again, it is my opinion that the Academy of Dispensing Audiologists is an organization that we should consider as part of our post-graduate education.

The third organization that supports me and enriches my knowledge I found in 1971 after I resigned membership in the

American Speech and Hearing Association as non-productive for audiologists.

I received a brochure by chance and came to the summer meeting as a non-member. I was so enthused by the amount of work that was accomplished I applied for membership. Never had I seen in any professional conference or convention, the dedication to purpose or stimulating communication I found that summer in the Academy of Rehabilitative Audiology Summer Institute.

My first meeting was a battle between two ideologies that exists even today, should the audiologist dispense hearing aids for profit? Other years and other institutes have given me usable knowledge that I utilize today in my business. The adult communication rehabilitation skills learned at Soquel from the work being done at the Veteran's Hospital in San Francisco. The equipment and language teaching techniques learned at the institute at National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester. The institute in Champaign at the University of Illinois where lengthy discussions on hearing aid evaluation techniques and rehabilitation techniques helped me resolve some efficiency problems I was having at the time. This list can keep growing but my point is, I have gained more education in my professional sub-specialty by attending the summer institutes of this Academy than five years of formal education. For all of you responsible for making this education possible, THANK YOU.

What you, we, have to remember is that there are many, many professional organizations vying for your time and dues. You must be selective and do your own research into what can this or that organization provide you for your money. If the professional organization to which you belong to no longer enriches your knowledge of your field or encourages your ideas, then it is time to resign from that organization and find one that does.

Another area I wish to discuss in my continuing education system is journal reading. As audiologists we have interests that overlap with several other professions, therefore, we have possibly 25 or 30 journals which can take up our time. If you are a busy private practitioner, you cannot afford the time to read all of these articles of varying interest. Thus, as with professional organizations, you must limit your greatest reading time to those journals which can most further your practical knowledge.

Since I have been dispensing hearing aids for a living, my personal reading has changed. As an example, I am no longer providing ENG services, therefore I see no point in spending large amounts of time studying this procedure. The same argument can be made for other esoteric otoneurological evaluations. When I have a patient for whom this is indicated, I refer them to others who have the facility.

Two journals which have benefited me the most for my pre-

sent orientation are the hearing aid industry's trade journals. *Hearing Instruments* and *Hearing Aid Journal* have provided much of the practical information I have needed in my business. Of course, not every article is a masterpiece or non-biased but generally the information is useful. *The Journal Of The Academy of Rehabilitation Audiology* has contained much practical information for my business interests. What could be most useful would be a reader's service which would screen various journals and either print or record on tape articles of interest to specific sub-specialties in our profession. This service could cover both professional and business articles.

The final area of my post-graduate education in hearing aids has come from attending manufacturer's seminars. As with the other two areas, some seminars are truly more educational. Some have bordered on bribery to promote their particular aid, while others have given me invaluable information in running my business. Two manufacturers have provided the most help in understanding the generic hearing aid, how it is designed, manufactured, repaired, and fit to the patient. These companies are Audiotone, Inc. and the Vicon Instrument Company. I highly recommend the dispensing audiologist to attend these seminars if at all possible. Each company has different rules for invitation. At Audiotone, Inc. I recommend attendance at a "dealers" session rather than audiology seminar if you desire to learn the hearing aid business as well as fitting procedures.

I have attempted to review in this paper my experiences in post-graduate hearing-aid dispensing education. There is nothing all-wise about my selection of organizations, journals or seminars. The only criterion was which had provided me with the greatest education in delivering the practical auditory rehabilitation process to my patients over the past four years.