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Fort HealthCare Ear, Nose and Throat patients Harley Frey (left) and Jim Moldenhauer (right) received hearing devices from audiologist Lori Fish and their marriages. During Better Speech and Hearing Month in May, the clinic's three locations are offering discounts on hearing aid batteries.

Technically advanced hearing devices improve quality of life

FORT ATKINSON — Last Mother's Day, with all his family present for a special celebration, Jim Moldenhauer first felt his hearing loss. Everyone was talking at once, and Moldenhauer strained to hear even parts of conversations. He'd become accustomed to asking his wife to repeat herself, but this was different. All day long, he felt like an outsider.

"It occurred to me that if I have some kind of medical situation, I should get it checked," he recalls. "My mother had a loss of hearing in the latter part of her life, and I thought that might be my condition. We live in the area, and I'd received the Fort HealthCare brochure, so I knew about the services at the Ear, Nose and Throat Clinic. I made an appointment with Dr. Anderson who referred me to Audiologist Lori Fish, just down the hall. I have not had one regret since."

Fish was able to diagnose Moldenhauer's loss of hearing in his left ear as hereditary, from his mother's side, though he says his father lived to be 99 and "heard plenty of things he shouldn't have." Moldenhauer's loss was in both the lower and upper ends of his hearing range, so it took some time to get the controls of his hearing aid tweaked. Fish was patient and persistent, he recalls. "She took great care of me. She had extreme patience and was willing to listen to all my concerns and questions."

May is Better Speech and Hearing month, and Fort HealthCare Audiologist Lori Fish is using the opportunity to educate people about the options in hearing devices.

"According to the Better Hearing Institute (BHI), nearly 15 percent of Americans between the

ages of 41 and 59 are experiencing hearing problems," Fish said. "And there is research to indicate a relationship between hearing loss and income loss," she added. "This national survey by the BHI demonstrates that hearing loss has a significant impact on people's ability to earn a livelihood and underscores the importance of treating hearing loss as early as possible," Fish said. She stresses that hearing difficulties are not exclusive to the senior population.

Progress is being made on many fronts. Advances in digital technology have dramatically improved hearing aids. They are smaller than ever with better sound quality, and some manufacturers have created a series of "designer" devices for the fashion-conscious baby boomer generation. Technology, not fashion, was what helped Moldenhauer with his diagnosis.

"I have four programs in my hearing aid," he explained. "One is for local, one-on-one conversations, and the second is for church where I don't need to hear the person right next to me but I do need to hear further away. The third is for restaurants where I don't want to hear people at the next table, but I do want to hear those sitting with me, and the fourth is for telephone use." Moldenhauer's aid is digital, so a little button chimes to let him know what program he's on.

A retired budget manager for Chrysler Corporation, Moldenhauer is 70 now, and has had his hearing aid one full year. He appreciates the sounds of the birds outside his home, and even the squeaky chair he sits in that he never knew squeaked. His aid is so much a part of him he sometimes forgets to remove it at bedtime. There was an adjustment period while he got used to wearing it, "but it's no different than if you were to get glasses," he says.

Fish's patient Harley Frey agrees. Like Moldenhauer, Frey was referred by a physician to Fish's office, and also had hearing loss in his left ear. "Lori spent quite a bit of time with me and she didn't push me. She was low-key and made it clear that the decision was mine. I chose a hearing aid I thought would fit my needs. Lori was conscientious and concerned that I liked it and would use it and not put it in the dresser drawer," Frey recalls.

Frey is a diabetic, which along with heart, circulatory or thyroid problems, can be a medical cause of hearing loss. Common indicators of hearing loss include difficulty following conversations involving more than two people, keeping the TV or radio tuned to high, ringing in the ears, or trouble hearing women and children.

Frey, 74, has had his aid only two months but he's happy with the results. "My grandkids don't have to yell at me anymore and I go about doing my business, lawn care, hunting, the usual," he said.

Both men share very supportive networks, especially from their wives. Moldenhauer's wife, Judith, and Harley's wife, Ginny, accompany their husbands to all their appointments. "She knows as much about my hearing aid as I do," Moldenhauer laughed. Both wives were instrumental in getting their husbands to have their hearing checked, and both offer gentle reminders when the men forget to wear their aids or turn them up. "Our marriage is better," reflects Judith. "We can communicate."

In honor of Better Speech and Hearing Month, Fish and the staff at Fort HealthCare Ear, Nose and Throat Clinics are offering discounts on hearing aid batteries. Patrons may purchase up to two cartons of hearing aid batteries for only \$20 each. To schedule a hearing test or learn more about hearing devices, call 563-6667.