

HEARING LOSS AND EARNING POTENTIAL

By Linda Grong

Doctor of audiology

Like many doctors of audiology, I read every article and conference offerings that deal with the demographic shift for hearing health care and how to serve the baby boomers as they come to our practice. More and more, I am seeing the population of my audiology practice shift to younger patients both male and female, and many of them are still in the workforce.

The effect of hearing loss on a person's quality of life is self evident to the practitioner. But, working with individuals who encounter daily challenges of working and doing business in acoustically dynamic environments is becoming more frequent. Patients are more savvy when it comes to technology and have a lot more information at their disposal, making them more "educated" before they get into my office. They are aware of the technologies available and have some idea and/or opinion of what manufacturer has a product they would like to try.

Dollars and Cents/ The Better Hearing Institute has conducted research regarding the impact of hearing loss on income. Specifically, they address the prevalence in hearing loss increasing in younger patients. BHI's research indicates that hearing loss is no longer a health care issue only for seniors to address: One out of six persons between the ages of 41 and 59 (baby boomers) and one out of every 14 persons between the ages of 29 and 40 (generation-X) has some hearing loss. These groups are very likely to be working full time, and surveys show that hearing loss can result in loss of income or reduced earning potential. The research also revealed that working Americans with untreated hearing loss are losing at least one-hundred billion (\$100,000,000,000) a year in earnings. Those with mild hearing loss averaged one-thousand dollars per year while those with profound hearing loss averaged \$12,000 per year in lost income.

Importance of Treatment/ As a Doctor of Audiology, I know effective communication is critical for most of us to perform our jobs. I know that someone with hearing loss, even at mild levels, can miss parts of a conversation that could change the entire meaning of what was said. And, even a small mis-

communication can result in a mistake that has significant repercussions.

Therefore, anyone in the workforce with untreated hearing loss is at risk to lose some earning potential.

Information from the BHI research indicates that the treatment of the hearing loss with hearing technology can reduce the impact on earnings by at least 50 percent. The benefits of using hearing technology and the improvements they bring to a person's personal and professional life is well documented. Additional research from the BHI shows that nine out of 10 hearing device owners are satisfied with the benefits they receive. Specific improvements were noted in more effective communication (71 percent), better social life (56 percent), relationships at home (55 percent), in the workplace (48 percent), improved emotional health (40 percent), and even better physical health (24 percent).

The impact of a hearing loss is not always first noticed by the hard-of-hearing individual, so we need to educate the general public and make them aware of warning signs. If family members or friends at home are commenting about their hearing, perhaps they will wonder if co-workers and supervisors are noticing problems too. This awareness may be more motivating for the individual to take action. As a hearing health professional, I am alert to the hesitance, resistance, and apprehension patients have about getting hearing technology. It stands to reason that in the marketplace or world of business, an individual in need of hearing technology would have concerns about the conspicuousness of the devices and any prejudice or discrimination by clients/co-workers that may result from wearing hearing technology.

Technology Keeps Up/ The "boomers" are familiar with Blue-Tooth devices, hands-free headsets and ear-phones attached to MP3 players in people's ears, including their own, so the sleek modern designs of some of the newer devices are consistent with what they see with other electronics devices and that establishes a certain comfort level from the start. Manufacturers are offering colors from hot pink to metallic blue, fire red to leopard skin... and hearing aid wears are choosing these fun colors. The cosmetic comfort level



toward hearing technology is gradually changing with the newer generations of hearing impaired patients. Baby boomer patients I see are very responsive to the small light weight receiver-in-the-ear (RITE) technology and the micro behind-the-ear aids with open and thin tube fittings. More and more, patients I fit with one of the smaller RITEs or open-fit BTEs are referring people they know and co-workers. When these referred patients come in, they often ask for the devices by name. Now it isn't always physically possible, there are many choices for small, discreet devices with different fitting ranges and speed settings. Manufacturers are making sleeker and more functional devices.

Acoustical comfort has also increased tremendously. With each passing year manufacturers are introducing new algorithms, chips, microphone configurations, wireless features for enhanced listening in adverse listening situations. Some of the newer devices include high performance, fast processing with automatic changes that work so subtly that the only thing the wearer will notice is how much better they can hear. Hearing aids are using wireless connection between the right and left ear for binaural interface, or focus directional microphones in one ear, and adjust volume on the other.

In the past, I had a tendency to focus on the effects of hearing loss on an individual's personal life because of the age of the patients. But now, with younger patients I am seeing, the issues within the work and social environment are an even bigger priority. Within the past decade technology has exploded. Hearing instrument users are more and more satisfied with their listening experiences with these new devices. With technology and cosmetic changes audiologists are able to reach more and more Boomers and Xers. We can make the new technology reach their ultimate communication potentials in their work environment.