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Interview: Older Adults Avoid Hearing Aids

Three million Canadians suffer from hearing loss, but only one in six wear hearing aids according to the Hearing Foundation of Canada.

Studies in other countries show similar results. In 2012, researchers from John Hopkins University found that of 26.7 million Americans, aged 50 and older suffering from hearing loss, only one in seven used hearing aids.

Now, U.K. researchers have turned to older adults to find out why.



The study focused on three types of hearing-impaired older people:

- 1. long-term users of hearing aids*
- 2. new hearing aid users, and*
- 3. people on a waiting list for audiological services.*

Nearly half of older adults surveyed reported not receiving the practical assistance they required to adjust to wearing a hearing aid. Many more complained of the deplorable lack of information about hearing aids. The results have huge implications for the overall health and well-being of older people.

The new research was led by Timothy Kelly, professor of social work in the school of education, social work and community education, University of Dundee, Dundee, U.K.

The findings were published online Feb.2, 2013 in the journal Health and Social Care in the Community.

AHB reached Dr. Kelly at the University of Dundee.

RD: Participants complained of a lack of general information.

Timothy Kelly: That's right. For instance, some people thought that their hearing aid would restore their hearing to "normal" and they were very disappointed that their hearing was not perfect.

They also reported that they didn't understand hearing and hearing loss, so even basic information was lacking.

People on the waiting list didn't know what to expect or how long it would take to get their hearing aid.

People who had just been fitted had many, many unanswered questions . . . ranging from how to clean the hearing aid to how long they should wear it. One person wore the hearing aid for 24 hours, not knowing this was not a good idea.

RD: They wanted more practical assistance to help them adjust to the aid.

TK: Yes, 48 per cent said they did not get the practical assistance they needed.

This included things such as:

- how to reassemble aid after cleaning
- adjusting uncomfortable ear pieces
- how to use assistive devices (e.g. doorbells, telephones and alarm clocks for people with hearing impairments)
- electronic security devices interfering with the aid, and
- difficulty changing batteries.

Really basic help was needed.

Just imagine being 75-years-old, wearing tri-focal or vari-focal glasses, having arthritic fingers *and* trying to find and open a tiny compartment, remove a small battery, replace the battery and close the tiny compartment again – all without the benefit of clear and easily understandable instructions.

These "simple" tasks became barriers for people and the lack of information was compounded by a lack of practical assistance when needed.

RD: Some described difficulties with the devices themselves. For instance, some heard a piercing whistling sound when the aid was inserted.

TK: Some participants did mention the whistling. Others spoke about the discomfort of wind blowing in the microphone, the aid setting off security devices when entering stores, uncomfortable ear pieces and a host of other problems.

Many of the problems could easily be remedied but, unfortunately, people lacked the necessary information.

RD: The study suggests people had unrealistic expectations about what a hearing aid could do.

TK: Yes, some thought they would have the same level of hearing they had as a young person. So they were very disappointed and wondered if it was worth the hassle.

Even with the digital technology, older adults found it difficult to hear in social settings such as dinner with friends in a restaurant.

The gap between reality and unrealistic expectations remained large if they did not know what was "normal" with a hearing aid, how to manage their hearing environment or that they could ask a restaurant to turn background music off or down.

A good example of this was a gentleman who, shortly after being fitted with a hearing aid, went to a football match between two rival teams from the same city. He was looking forward to being able to better experience the match with his new "normal" hearing. He was very unprepared for the roar of 70,000 screaming football fans from the West of Scotland! It was not the pleasant experience he anticipated.

RD: Others had cosmetic concerns.

TK: Yes, this issue came up in the focus groups, though it was not universal.

Some in the groups expressed cosmetic concerns, but others did not. Those who were unconcerned said they knew they were not standing out because so many older people wore hearing aids. And in today's world everyone walks around with wires hanging out of their ears listening to music.

This positive reframing of the issue came as a surprise to those who felt self-conscious about wearing an aid. It gave them something to think about and it appeared to lessen the stigma they felt.

RD: Many had concerns about how to care for the hearing aid.

TK: Yes. Some remembered getting an “owners manual” and others did not. Those who looked at the manual said it was not that useful as it was too technical.

People described feeling overwhelmed when being fitted with a hearing aid, and getting home and not remembering what the audiologist told them.

Interestingly, few of the participants had or wanted family involvement.

RD: Some reported pressure from private dispensers. Can you give me an example?

TK: The National Health Service in Scotland (NHS) is free at the point of service and hearing aids are part of the NHS service provision. At the time of data collection, the waiting list for audiology services could be long in some areas of Scotland.

However, there are also private companies that provide audiological assessments much quicker but for a fee. Some of the participants expressed concerns about the hard sell tactics of some of these providers.

Examples included time sensitive offers for a reduced price. “The cost is £3,000, but if you buy today we'll knock £1,000 off.” Or “Your other ear could benefit from a hearing aid. So we'll give you two for the price of one if you buy today.”

Other examples included typical up-selling techniques. So people would be offered the ultra-deluxe model with incredible numbers of channels. Salespersons would suggest that the top of the range model would be the one that they really needed when a middle-range or basic range hearing aid would have been more than sufficient.

Others said salespeople told them that the NHS did not provide digital hearing aids, which was patently false.

RD: According to one expert, "Hearing aids require two or three months of auditory rehabilitation to use them properly." So what can be done?

TK: Well, first and foremost, we have to be clear that auditory rehabilitation is more than just providing technology. There is ample evidence that providing technology alone does not meet the needs of older persons.

Secondly, a range of rehabilitation services are required. These could include:

- well-timed individual support
- better designed information packages available at different points along the rehabilitation journey (e.g before, during and after the fitting)
- online support and information
- group-based programs offering information and support, and
- written information for families.

And finally, older users can and should be involved in shaping these services.

Study: First Nations Grandparents Blaze Path for Future Generations

New research shows that First Nation grandparents are overcoming the damage caused by residential schools to blaze a bright future for their grandchildren.

Researchers led by Grace Thompson of the University of Toronto interviewed 15 First Nations grandparents from two different Canadian cities, both with large First Nations populations.

The results show grandparents promote positive intergenerational relationships and renew First Nations traditions.

The findings were published in the *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* (Vol. 76, No.1, 2013).

Fostering intergenerational relationships

According to the study, all participants set out to cultivate strong intergenerational bonds with their grandchildren.

Almost all the grandparents attended residential schools as children, so they first had to reclaim their First Nations knowledge, spirituality and cultural practices.

Participants said becoming a grandparent marked a significant event in their life journey.

One grandfather described the grandparent role as "walking the red road."

He explained: "Now that I am older I behave like an older person and I'm supposed to be providing wisdom and . . . protection."

Most participants talked about the importance of spending time on the reserve.

As one grandmother remarked, "If it wasn't for me, they probably wouldn't . . . even be on a reserve or anything like that."

Another grandmother used summer vacations to instill love of the land in her grandchildren.

We're gonna be going home this summer, sort of like a reunion, and hopefully a lot of people will go. And I'll take them in the canoe. They have never set foot in a river, you know, the wild river. Cook by outside. So that's the things I am going to teach them.

Along the same line, "Mable," who was adopted into a white family at an early age, noted: "We're just trying to find the family, like the connections, and . . . going back every year to the reserve it's, I mean, it's home for me. My [biological] mom is there."

Protecting First Nations identity

The grandparents in the study were eager to introduce their grandchildren to the traditional teachings and ceremonies of the First Nations.

Among them:

- the creation story
- stories from the longhouse
- sacred colours, and four directions
- pow-wow ceremonies, and
- traditional singing and dancing.

They talked about sacred ceremonies, such as the feasting of the feathers and receiving spirit names. Some mentioned the importance of sacred herbs and purifying themselves through the act of smudging.

Grandparents also taught the traditional arts such as beading, doll-making and oramental dressmaking for traditional dance competitions

Others explored the power of dreams, a way of understanding the future.

Second chance

Some participants identified taking on the grandparent role as an opportunity to make up for past mistakes: "I don't think I was a good mother. But I think

I'm a hell of a grandmother . . . This second chance . . . you can't pay for this."

They also talked about the satisfaction of knowing their grandchildren will grow up with pride in their First Nations identity.

Said "Sylvia": "I want then to understand more about our culture, the meaning, the fasting, the sweat lodge and everything. I'm so proud of it. My son is proud of it. I'm glad I'm doing it."

Another grandmother described her desire to learn Ojibway as a way to teach her grandson the language: "If I could learn it, I could still pass it [on]."

Historically, grandparents have held a powerful place in the lives of the First Nations.

These grandparents demonstrated resilience, coming to terms with their own difficult past, to strengthen family bonds and bring traditional values to the next generation.

Interview: A Day to Be Lived

They have said good-bye to their homes, given away many of their cherished possessions and moved into assisted living.

Swedish architect and researcher Catharina Nord examined how older adults handle the loss of many belongings when they move into assisted living, and how they decide what to bring with them.

What she found surprised her.

Dr. Nord is senior lecturer at the National Institute for the Study of Ageing and Later Life



at Linköping University, Norrköping, Sweden.

The findings appeared online in the Journal of Aging Studies (Vol. 27. No. 2, 2013).

AHB reached Dr. Nord at Linköping University.

Ruth Dempsey: How is assisted living structured in Sweden?

Catharina Nord: Assisted living is form of housing that is reserved for people who require 24-hour care. The housing is funded by the local municipalities, and an individual who applies for residency is assessed by local social services.

In fact, very few people in Sweden live in assisted living.

The facility is often organized in wards with 10 to 15 people living together. Individuals have their own small flat and access to common areas like the dining room and living-room.

RD: Participants were coping with various medical conditions.

CN: Most of the older persons had mobility problems for various reasons, such as stroke, and were using walking aids or a wheelchair. Others were frail and had poor balance as a result of advanced age. A few had vision impairments.

RD: So what were their new living spaces like?

CN: They were very small. The most common living unit was a one bed-sitting room with a kitchenette and a bathroom. Some had a bed-sitting room and a small kitchen. These bigger flats also had a balcony, which must have been very nice in the summer, especially for those who could not go out on their own.

RD: The study showed most participants brought at least one item from their original home.

CN: Yes, this was usually a large item, such as a chair or chest of drawers. Quite often, it had been made by their father. These objects were among the oldest artifacts they had and more than hundred years old, in some cases.

RD: There were other objects which you dub memorabilia. Can you give me an example?

CN: Actually, the items just mentioned, from their parental home, are typical memorabilia.

Other common things were photos, mainly studio photos of generations of family members, taken over nearly a century. For example, a parent's wedding photo.

One woman had a photo of herself and her deceased sister when they were five. It was an 85-year-old photo.

Another had a small, decorative frog her little son had bought when he wanted to make peace after an argument with his mother.

And many had brought small things reminding them of their roles throughout life. These could be gifts from workmates or paintings won in the union's art club lottery.

RD: There were also reminders of cherished hobbies and pastimes.

CN: These objects closely mirrored male and female leisure activities. For example, men had sports awards or wooden handmade things. Women had kept small decorative hand embroideries or knitted items.

Most of them had stopped doing this kind of work because of problems with their hands. But one woman, the youngest in the study, still knitted children's outfits for the local Red Cross.

RD: The old people chose a practical item, when you asked them to indicate their most important possession. Why is that?

CN: This was a surprise. In similar studies, older adults had identified memorabilia as most important.

In my study, the participants seemed less focused on the past and more concerned with the quality of everyday life. For instance, they mentioned their TV set, their bed or their new table where they sat for a large part of the day.

RD: You say participants used these practical items to anchor their everyday activities. How so?

CN: These old persons had organized a way of living that took into account their restricted mobility and which suited their interests.

The participants shifted during the day between a few spots in the bed-sitting room. For example, some had a table where they kept things they needed within reach, such as magnifying glass, a basket of fruit, a roll of kitchen paper, a radio, a mobile phone or other practical things for entertainment. One 90-year-old man dubbed this table "his office."

Others had a comfortable armchair where they could sit and watch TV and read books or newspapers.

And they all had a coffee machine, which they sometimes used to serve coffee for guests.

RD: They had their meals in the dining room, but they chose to spend most of the time in their apartments.

CN: This is an important point. I have met other people in research projects who have said the same. Many who live in assisted living find their privacy very important. They want to be able to choose whether they take part in joint activities or not.

Some are too fragile to socialize much with strangers or new friends. They have to use their energy economically.

Also, one man mentioned that hearing impairments and cognitive difficulties can hamper conversations with fellow residents, and he regretted that.

I don't think the staff would force anyone to join an activity if they did not want to participate.

RD: These old persons played down their aches and pains and seized the day.

CN: Yes. It seemed to me that the people I met in this study lived a very dignified and peaceful life. They were pleased with their new home. They were free from obligations and could choose to do what they wanted within certain limits.

They challenged the image of older people as depressed and passive in a way I did not expect. I think the study showed that it is possible to be independent, even in a situation in which you are highly dependent on staff to manage ordinary daily activities.

However, I have to add that I met people who were in very good shape. I would guess that there were people in the assisted living facility who were less able to manage.

AHB Dispatches: Women of a Certain Age

In this issue, we bring you a poem by Marilyn Henighan of Ottawa, Ont., for our semi-regular feature, AHB Dispatches.

Women of a Certain Age

There is a midwinter spring
for women of a certain age.
I have seen it in the faces
of my friends.
A blazing beauty of expression that
flashes out like sun on ice.



Some inner chord struck, perhaps.
I wonder what,
to flash out with such intensity.
A memory maybe, long archived, unexpectedly coalesces with feeling and,
for one brief moment,
yesterday becomes today,
spilling out with such joy
that winter melts away.

ROUNDUP

BABA YAGA'S HOUSE: The CBC Radio documentary that aired on the *Sunday Edition* last fall sparked interest in new ways of living out the later years.

Baba Yaga's House is the story of 19 aging feminists, who convinced French politicians to fund a women's only seniors' home that the women would run themselves.

Listeners across the country wrote to the program. They argued the same option should be available for older adults everywhere.

Where do we sign up, they asked.

Janet Torge has now launched a blog as a follow up to the discussion on the *Sunday Edition*. You can join the conversation at [Radical Resthomes](#).

THE WAY IT WAS IN BRITAIN IN 1945: The generation that lived through the war set out to rebuild Britain and create a fairer society.

The Spirit of '45, a new documentary by Ken Loach, recounts the 1945 British general election that installed a labour government headed by Clement Attlee. In just five years, the National Health Service was established and public utilities were nationalized.

"We had won the war together," Loach said. "Together we could win the peace."

If we could collectively plan to wage military campaigns, could we not plan to build houses, create a health service and make goods needed for reconstruction? The spirit of the age was to be our brother's and our sister's keeper."

For the documentary, Loach, 76, mined the British regional and national archives and found moving film footage and sound recordings that show a

country determined to build a better world. He also interviewed the people who were there like 90-year-old Ellen Thompson.

"The poverty was dreadful," she said. "In class, the teacher read out the register and if a child hadn't been in to school the day before, it was always for the same reason: they had stayed in bed while their mother washed their only set of clothes."

In the film, Dot Gibson of the National Pensioners Convention says the older generation must start talking to young people about the vision of 1945.

"We have a real chance to understand better what kind of life we want and to start to rebuild," she said.

Source: *The Observer*

OLDER KOREANS STRUGGLE AS FAMILIES CHANGE: In just one generation the proportion of older adults in South Korea has tripled, climbing to 11 per cent in 2010. On the other hand, the country's fertility rate has plummeted.

In the current issue of *The Journal*, Korean Minister of Health and Welfare Chemin Rim has outlined strategies to address the reality of low fertility and a rapidly aging society.

Fertility

To boost the fertility rate, the government has proposed:

- better child care leave
- flexible working hours
- more public and private child care, and
- special certification for family-friendly companies.

Aging

The government has proposed a higher retirement age so people can save more money.

Other proposals include:

- exclusive jobs for retirees
- training for businesses start-ups
- financial support/training for those who want to resettle and farm in rural areas, and
- more opportunities for older adults in the voluntary sector.

But some say the government was caught off guard by the quick erosion of family structures.

Last February, the *New York Times* reported the number of people aged 65 and older committing suicide in South Korea had nearly quadrupled in recent years, making the country's rate of such deaths among the highest in the developed world.

Meanwhile, the award-winning novel *Please Look After Mom* by Kyung-Sook Shin added a heartbreaking note to the theme of fraying family structures.

CENTENARIAN WINS APOLOGY FROM FACEBOOK: When Marguerite Joseph signed up with the social network three years ago at the age of 102, she was forced to lie about her age.

The native of Grosse Pointe Shores, Mich., tried to put 1908 as her year of birth, but Facebook insisted she meant 1928.

Earlier this year, she posted a note to her account expressing her displeasure with the media giant.

A spokesperson for the company said a "glitch" in the system meant that the maximum age anyone can be registered as is 99.

Facebook apologized for the issue and said a solution was being worked on.