



Ways to Incorporate Hearing Conservation and Preservation in Your Audiology Practice

By Luke Hinzmann

There is only one kind of hearing loss that is 100 percent preventable. While you will never prevent them all, if you could help someone and stop hearing loss before it started, would you? All audiologists should answer a resounding YES! Preventative health care has

been found to be helpful for nearly everyone in nearly every situation (World Research Foundation, 2015). Not only can you provide this service to your patients, you can increase your practice's revenue simultaneously. With some basic ideas and

processes to consider, both goals can be accomplished almost immediately.

Forms of Hearing Conservation

Hearing conservation and preservation is first and foremost education and awareness. The

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) estimates that approximately 15 percent of Americans (26 million people) between the ages of 20 and 69 have high-frequency hearing loss due to exposure to noise at work or during leisure activities (2015). This means that people either are unaware of the possible damage that noise can cause or they know about it and do nothing to prevent it.

Our patients are harming their hearing by being exposed to unsafe noise levels, too often without hearing protective devices. The education can be done in several ways. You may educate large groups of people or just the person in front of you. You may promote awareness through marketing materials to mass quantities or simple informational materials inside your office. The bottom line is you need to be educating your patients about basic hearing conservation and what is safe. The Academy's scope of practice states that "prevention of hearing loss" is part of the audiologist's job (2004).

Another form of hearing conservation is to actually monitor hearing thresholds on a continuous basis. Most of your patients will probably not need this type of monitoring. This would be best applied to high-risk individuals who tend to be around a lot of noise on a regular basis. This may include someone exposed frequently to high noise levels in a recreational form. In this case, you would have to motivate and encourage your patient to have audiograms done on a schedule. Most typically, this would involve people who work in high-level noise areas. The best way to get them into this program is from the employer side. If the employer supports the program, or even requires it, then many workers will likely participate.

The most important form of hearing conservation is to provide useful solutions. While you can educate and even monitor someone's hearing all you like, if you don't have a way to actually solve the issue, then things will never change. Education may teach someone to avoid or alter those high-level noise environments, but for many people, it is either unavoidable or not worth it to give up their hobbies. For most cases, you could encourage the use of hearing-protection devices. These may include a pair of disposable ear plugs, nicer custom ear plugs, earmuffs (that can vary from cheap to expensive and electronic), or premium custom digital noise plugs. Without some type of hearing protection, the noise-induced hearing loss will not show signs of decrease. Just about anything custom is where the audiologist comes in.

While most consumers are likely to purchase muffs or disposable plugs outside of an audiology office, only a handful of people know how to take the ear impressions needed to create custom plugs. Not only this, but very few consumers would know how or where to buy custom plugs without the help of their audiologist. In either case, that patient needs a service from the audiologist.

Hearing Conservation in Your Practice

One way to incorporate hearing conservation into your practice is to market that service directly to consumers. Just as you market hearing services and hearing solutions, your practice can do the same for hearing conservation services and solutions. Depending on your individual practice and target market, this may or may not be worth it. When you consider the amount of profit in this area, it is often not the main area to market. In most cases, it should be

marketed to a new patient or already existing patient, but someone who is already in your office. This can be as simple as informational posters in strategically placed areas to get your patient to simply think about noise and its effect on their ears. If patients partake in noisy hobbies or work in noisy environments, they are much more likely to mention this at some point during the appointment. If they have thought about and mentioned it, they are likely someone who would benefit from a solution that you have.

Another way is to market hearing conservation programs to businesses that employ at-risk workers. A hearing conservation program that involves both an educational component and monitoring of hearing thresholds can be very lucrative. The more employees who are in the program, the more revenue it can generate for the audiology practice. Most of these contracts are done on a regular basis, often annually. While this can be very lucrative, the operating costs are often high. Usually several (or many) contracts are needed for the revenues to outweigh the operating costs. Most clinical audiologists will not be doing this; however, it should be considered, as it can produce huge opportunities for growth and revenue, depending on the specifics.

Often a highly cost-effective option is to speak at a seminar or a setting where the audiologist can inform a large group of people at one time about hearing conservation. The audiologist should be cautious—if the main goal is to sell lots of custom ear plugs, most people listening can tell they are being sold. But, if the audiologist can present the information well, and educate the group while offering both services and products, the result is often a good one. This technique is often done for hearing services and solutions, but can easily

be adjusted for hearing conservation and preservation as well. The most difficult part is likely finding a proper setting and a group of highly motivated people willing to listen.

One of the best and simplest ways to incorporate hearing conservation is to inform your already-existing patients, especially the ones who already have noise-induced hearing loss, of the services and products you have available to them. Many patients do not know what you can do to help them reduce any further hearing damage. Again, this goes back to education, because educated patients are the best kind. Most patients who are highly motivated, unfortunately, are the ones who already have noise-induced hearing loss. It is these patients, along with the high-risk patients you identified during the case history intake, who should get a free pair of disposable ear plugs. This challenges the patient to be more proactive and gives you an opportunity to offer even better products. These better products are any custom hearing protection devices that require an audiologist's services. These can be custom noise plugs that are sold around \$100 to \$200 a pair or custom digital noise plugs with volume-controlled

amplification that sell upward of \$2,000. The profit margins of ear plugs are not that of hearing aids, but they can be significant to supplement. By simply mentioning the available solutions (to every single identified high-risk patient), you are likely to help more people, thus increase revenue.

There are many different ways to incorporate hearing conservation into your practice, only some of the possibilities were mentioned. Not only is our obligation as audiologists to help and preserve hearing, but it will often directly affect the practice's revenue generated. In a world where online shopping becomes more of the norm, even in health care, and especially in audiology and with hearing aids, this is just one more way that you can stand out and provide more value to your patients. **AT**

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Illustration by Johanna van der Sterre.

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