



Levi Reiter

First Person is an occasional column in *The Hearing Journal* in which practitioners share personal experiences that are of interest and relevance to other hearing healthcare providers.

Addressing cultural diversity in your practice: A case in point

By Levi A. Reiter

It is understood that issues of cultural diversity are of vital importance in fields such as clinical psychology, social work, early elementary education, and even speech-language pathology, but... *hearing aid dispensing?*

Psychology and social work depend on knowledge of culture because of its pervasive influence on personality and behavior. Education of young children will be more successful if the examples and stories it uses are culturally familiar to the budding scholar. Speech-language pathology, too, benefits from understanding cultural diversity, including the unique phonetic and linguistic structures inherent in different languages, but... *hearing aid dispensing?*

The answer is a resounding *yes*. Cultural norms, customs, laws, and even languages may impact on hearing aid selection criteria. For example, linguistic differences among cultures may determine when amplification is called for. While bilateral, mild to moderate, sensorineural hearing loss would probably qualify English-speaking children for hearing aids, children who speak Mandarin Chinese may get along well without amplification.¹ Much of that has to do with the phonetic differences in the respective languages (see Scott, 2005, for an excellent treatment of this subject²).

FITTINGS THAT COMPLY WITH ORTHODOX JEWISH LAW

Cultural norms, customs, and laws may also have a direct impact

on the dynamic of hearing aid dispensing. This relationship is nowhere more apparent than in Orthodox Jewish communities.

As a dispensing audiologist in one of the world's largest Orthodox Jewish communities, I have had to develop knowledge and expertise in Jewish laws and customs related to hearing aids. Fortunately, my personal background as an Orthodox Jew has facilitated this learning experience for me.

I was inspired to write about this topic by the many inquiries

and patient referrals I receive from colleagues in our field who are unfamiliar with some of the issues that inevitably arise when a patient/client happens to be a member of the Orthodox Jewish faith.

There are approximately 650,000 Orthodox Jews in North America, and there are communities in virtually every U.S. state. Therefore, wherever readers practice, it is likely that this article may be of practical relevance to them one day.

The issues that an audiologist/dispenser is likely to encounter and be required to address are related to the use of hearing aids on the Jewish Sabbath and Holidays.

Following is a list of "do's" and "don'ts" pertaining to hearing aids that a hearing professional should know to be most effective in dealing with clients from the Orthodox Jewish community. In addition, I've offered practical suggestions for the professional to use in helping a client handle some potentially "sticky" issues. In all likelihood, clients will be grateful for such suggestions, which they may also wish to discuss with a competent Rabbinic authority.

“...cultural norms, customs, laws, and even languages may impact on hearing aid selection criteria...”

DO'S, DON'TS, AND SOME SUGGESTIONS

(1) Hearing aids may not be turned on or off on the Sabbath or during Festivals.

❖ SUGGESTION: It is most helpful to advise a new hearing aid wearer to insert a fresh battery right before the Sabbath or Festival. This will reduce the likelihood of the hearing aid running out of power during the festive period.

❖ SUGGESTION: Other things being equal, select a hearing aid with the lowest possible battery drain rating. Extended battery life becomes a precious commodity when a festive period lasts 2 or even 3 days, e.g., when the Sabbath directly precedes or follows a 2-day Festival.

(2) In some communities, the volume controls (VC) may not be manipulated during the festive periods.

❖ SUGGESTION: Advise the patient to use one of the many environmentally interactive digital hearing aids that either lack a manual VC or in which the manual VC may be disabled.

❖ ALTERNATIVE SUGGESTION:

Select a hearing aid with a removable VC cover plate to prevent accidental adjustment of the VC by the wearer. The user can remove the plate after the festive period has ended.

(3) Program switches, e.g., M,T, M/T, 1,2,3, etc. may not be altered during the festive period.

❖ SUGGESTION: If a patient expresses concern, advise placing adhesive tape over switches during the festive period. This same advice applies to the battery door, should someone be concerned about tampering with it on the festive period.

(4) A hearing aid that squeals when removed from the ear may not be turned off on festive days.

❖ SUGGESTION: To prevent the annoying squeal and resulting reduction in battery life, a rounded toothpick can be inserted snugly into the canal portion of a BTE earmold. Or a rolled tissue can be inserted into the extended receiver tube of a custom aid. Either strategy will diminish the acoustic feedback and its negative effects.

Demonstrating to our patients that we

understand and appreciate how their particular cultural concerns and imperatives may complicate their successful use of hearing aids helps us to establish professional relationships with them based on mutual trust and understanding. By learning to deal knowledgeably with a culturally diverse clientele, we become better able to provide appropriate and successful solutions to all those who come to us for help with their hearing.

For a more complete treatment of the subject of hearing aids, cochlear implants, and Jewish culture see A Practical Guide to the Use of Electronic Hearing Devices on Shabbos and Yom Tov, by Rabbi Mordechai Shuchatowitz, published by Our Way/NJCD, a division of the Orthodox Union, 2003.

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