

On the difference between Audiologists and Hearing Aid Dealers

We are frequently asked by patients in our office, “What’s the difference between an audiologist and a hearing aid dealer?” It is not uncommon to have patients scheduled for second opinions about their hearing instrument fitting or who are dissatisfied with the fitting and follow up care provided by a hearing aid dealer. There are two common findings in these cases: The first centers on the instrument—inappropriate selection of the style of the hearing aid (e.g., fitting a small, canal style instrument in an ear with severe-to-profound loss) or inappropriate programming of the hearing aid such that it fails to meet the patient’s needs. The second centers on the limited training of the dispenser whose primary focus is selling hearing aids.

In order to fairly and appropriately answer the question about the difference between audiologists and hearing aid dealers, we need to examine those sections of state law that defines the scope of practice and the minimum academic training required for each provider group. Audiologists are defined in Chapter 4753 of the Ohio Revised Code (ORC). Hearing aid dealers in Chapter 4747, ORC.

State laws are enacted by the legislature to provide consumer protection. Boards composed of members including licensed practitioners, a member representing the public and an *ex officio* representative of the Attorney General’s office, issue licenses. Each practitioner licensed by the board must operate within the standards of care and conduct established in the law (scope of practice). Failure to practice within the law can result in fines and/or revocation of their license to practice within their profession

Definition of Practice (as written in the Ohio Revised Code)

Hearing Aid Dealers

4747.01(B)

“Practice of dealing in” or “fitting of” hearing aids means the sale of a hearing aid, and the measurement and testing of human hearing by means of an audiometer or by any other means for the purpose of selecting, adapting and selling a hearing aid to any person, and includes the making of impressions for earmolds.

Audiologists

4753.01 (G)

"Practice of audiology" means the planning, directing, supervising, and conducting of habilitative or rehabilitative counseling programs for individuals or groups of individuals who have (been diagnosed) or are suspected of having disorders of hearing; any service in audiology, including prevention, identification, evaluation, consultation, habilitation or rehabilitation, instruction, and research; participating in hearing conservation, hearing aid and assistive listening device

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evaluation, selection, preparation, dispensing, and orientation; fabricating ear molds; providing auditory training and speech reading; and administering tests of vestibular function and tests for tinnitus in accordance with section 4753.14 of the Revised Code.

Comments

Defining the practice of a health care profession limits areas in which the licensee may practice. For example, Hearing Aid Dealers are limited to testing hearing solely for the purposes of fitting hearing aids. Unlike Audiologists, they may not engage in, nor are they trained to complete diagnostic hearing or balance examinations nor participate in the assessment of patients with tinnitus. Audiologists are uniquely qualified and trained to identify a wide variety of pathology and underlying medical conditions of the hearing and balance systems and to refer these cases for appropriate medical or surgical treatment.

Requirements for License (as written in the Ohio Revised Code)

Hearing Aid Dealers

4747.05. (1-4) & 4747.10 (B)

- 18 yrs old
- good moral character
- free of contagious or infectious disease
- High School diploma or equivalent education (GED)
- pass qualifying examination specified and administered by board which "...shall be a thorough testing of knowledge required for the proper selecting, fitting and sale of hearing aids, but shall not be such that a medical or surgical education is required for successful completion. It shall consist of written and practical portions which shall include, but not be limited to, the following areas: Basic physics of sound, anatomy and physiology of the human ear, the function and purpose of hearing aids, pure tone audiometry, speech reception threshold testing and speech discrimination testing, masking techniques, recording and evaluation of audiograms and speech audiometry to determine proper selection and adaptation of hearing aids, earmold impression techniques."

Audiologists

4753.06 (B—E)

- Master's or Doctoral degree in Audiology
- Minimum of 350 hours of patient care hours obtained in an accredited college or university, in a cooperating program of an accredited college or university, or in another program approved by the board.
- He/she submits to the board evidence that he has passed the examination for licensure to practice

Comments

A High School diploma or GED coupled with a correspondence course in hearing aids offered by the International Hearing Society is the basis of academic training for the majority of hearing aid dealers across the country. The academic and clinical preparation of audiologists differs dramatically. By January 1, 2006 all new graduates applying for a license to practice audiology in Ohio must have an AuD or other equivalent doctoral degree. For 40 years the primary clinical degree in audiology was a Master's degree; a one or two-year course of academic and clinical study following the bachelor's degree.

Over 15 years ago, the leaders and educators in the profession of audiology realized that one or two years was not enough time to cover the expanding body of scientific, engineering, diagnostic and treatment methods needed to meet the needs of the patients being served. The American Academy of Audiology and other related professional organizations developed a four-year, post-bachelors curriculum for the professional doctorate in audiology—the Doctor of Audiology or AuD degree. Since that time over 1500 have graduated with over 3000 projected for 2006. Master's training programs have either closed or upgraded their academic and clinical offerings to train AuD audiologists.

The result has been an improved profession with well-educated, capable practitioners prepared to handle any hearing or balance problem that comes to their clinics and offices. With extensive training in counseling and rehabilitation, audiologists extend hearing rehabilitation beyond just fitting a hearing aid. They approach their patients with both clinical and technical skills necessary to optimize success with today's advanced and highly sophisticated hearing instruments. By their knowledge, extensive training and professional integrity, audiologists are best qualified to provide comprehensive solutions to patients in need of hearing rehabilitation.

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INTRODUCTION

This article was the lead item in our Fall practice newsletter. It was written in response to patient inquiries about the differences between audiologists and hearing aid dealers prompted in large part by an increase in advertising in our area by commercial hearing aid dealers. Of course we would like to think that we have been doing a superior job as proponents of our profession and that OUR patients would be fully aware of the differences between the two providers. As it turns out, even the more sophisticated patients had questions or were unclear about the differences. Each was seeking assurances that they were indeed in the right spot for the best hearing care. Of note, patients referred by their physicians inquired less than those who selected our practice by patient referral, as walk-ins or in response to our marketing efforts.

Most of our referrals are from primary care physicians. Those referred are unlikely to question either their physician or the practitioner to whom they have been referred. It seems that we have done our job in our practice when it comes to educating referral sources. It was readily apparent that potential patients in our community and across Ohio who make their own choices about health care providers needed to get this message.

I suggested to the leadership of Ohio Academy of Audiology that a consistent, well-planned marketing program be developed to get the word out about the differences between audiologists and hearing aid dealers. Its goal would be to enable consumers to make a well-informed choice when considering which hearing health care provider would best meet their needs. We are fortunate to have strong and active leadership in our academy. Couple that with active involvement by the membership and we will be able to fulfill several key elements in the Mission of the Ohio Academy of Audiology: *“To promote the public good by fostering the development, education, growth, status, autonomy and recognition of audiologists within the state of Ohio.”*

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