

## **Audiologist vs. Big Box Store**

**By Dianna Randolph Au.D CCC-A**

For many Americans with hearing loss, purchasing a hearing aid can be a very daunting task. It takes the average person 7 years to be fit with hearing aids after first being diagnosed with hearing loss. Questions arise like: Where do I go to? Which are the best for me and how much are they? Does my insurance cover them? You may have a friend who purchased hearing aids and now they are in a drawer or you may know someone whom can't live without their hearing aids. Recently, big box stores like Costco and Sam's Club have gotten into the hearing aid business. You may find they are less expensive, but what are you really getting when you go to one of these big box stores? And what are the benefits when you see an audiologist?

An Audiologist is educated and trained in the diagnosis, testing, evaluation and rehabilitation of non-medical treatable hearing loss. They provide individualized plans based on results obtained through comprehensive evaluations. An audiologist can work closely with primary care physicians, ear, nose and throat physicians and neurologists to evaluate and treat hearing loss and many ear related problems such as dizziness, vertigo and tinnitus. Most have doctorate degrees in the specialized field of Audiology and some may have Master's degrees at the least in order to maintain state licensure. Big Box stores usually employ a hearing aid dealer/specialist who screen hearing and provide hearing aids. According to the Ohio Revised Code in order to become a hearing aid dealer, you need to have a high school diploma or equivalent, have not committed a disqualifying offense or a crime of moral turpitude, free of contagious or infectious disease and pass a state test.

When you see one of the audiologist at Northwest Ohio Hearing Clinic you first are required to complete a case history specifically dealing with the medical history of the hearing loss, tinnitus or vertigo along with reviewing the list of currently medications you are taking which is then reviewed before testing takes place. Once testing is started, complete audiological examination is performed. This includes air conduction and bone conduction pure tone testing, speech reception and discrimination testing. Also, middle ear testing is performed to access the structures of the ear. Sometimes more specialized testing is needed to access a patient's ability to hear in noise or a tinnitus assessment will also be done if tinnitus is reported by the patient. After testing is completed, the results are discussed with the patient and/or family and the treatment plan and recommendations are given. If a specialist is recommended, we are available to discuss with your primary care assisting in the referral process to a specialist for you. If amplification is recommended, a review of the hearing loss, technology types and styles are discussed in further detail taking into account your lifestyle hearing needs and any financial concerns. Since many may not know what it sounds like to hear with hearing aids, a demonstration with hearing aids programmed with your hearing loss is made available at the consultation.

It is wise to establish a relationship with your audiologist as you would establish a relationship with your physician to assure your goals are met. Your hearing health care

professional needs to be someone you can trust to provide recommendations to meet your hearing needs and lifestyle. Consistency of your hearing care is of importance so it's best to be followed by same audiologist at all your visits. We understand there are emergencies which you would like address and so just like with your primary care, we aim to have an Audiologist available to continue the care at time of need.

It's not only the professionals which may separate an Audiologist from a big box retailer but it is also the quality of the product you will be getting. The FDA considers a hearing aid as a Class A medical device which is the same category as a joint replacement. Would any of us obtain our knee replacement from Costco or Sam's Club, I don't imagine we would? As we all know the Big-box vendors buy products in bulk and that's how they discount; however, these discounts can be deceiving. A brand like Kirkland is actually a general brand rebranded for Costco—the truth is that audiologists have access to these brands and those prices, but do not make *generalized* hearing aid recommendations because every person's hearing needs are different.

The fact of the matter is hearing aids manufactured for such a general population almost defeats the purpose of going for hearing help. An audiologist customizes your hearing aid your hearing loss. Did you know measurements are taken and programmed for each ear and determine the prescription gain according to your ear canal volume allowing ease of so daily wear —with big-box brands you may find certain elements exasperating, and therefore you will be less likely to actually use them. You may think wholesale prices should be the decision factor forgetting the about the quality and relationship with the hearing health care provider

You will at times see the same product in the big box store as you would in your audiology office. Don't be deceived. The name may be the same but there are many factors which the general public may not know about such as the ability to fine tune the devices because the manufacturers don't provide access to advanced programming features to the big box, making it less expensive.

We want you to be comfortable when making a decision when you are ready to obtain help. Do your research; ask questions before deciding. Hearing aids are medical devices which you will be utilizing daily. Be rest assured when visiting your Audiologist, we are here to help guide you to make the right choice and know there are options for all types of hearing losses, individuals and financial barriers. To have a positive hearing aid experience you need to consider factors such as, the confidence you have with your hearing health care provider, your specific hearing loss, were the correct hearing aids selected and programmed correctly, are you able to use the hearing aids correct and do you have realistic goals regarding the expectations of the devices. Remember the hearing aids are only as good as the person who is programming it. . At Northwest Ohio Hearing Clinic, we have over 70 years of combined experience with not only hearing aids, but assistance with tinnitus and dizziness. When you finally make that decision to get help for your hearing loss, let us help you make the best right choice for you