The UK slowly opens audiology services to the public as an essential service

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Reflecting on the importance of hearing health care during Coronavirus

Preston, UK, June 10th, 2020 – As the UK continues to open its audiology services to the public and implement new procedures using official guidelines, we consider what the future of audiology looks like. How is the industry ensuring the care they provide is relevant, convenient, and as safe as possible for both the audiologists and patients? What impact has the restrictions had on the hearing loss community and those who have yet to seek medical help?

For the foreseeable future, the way in which audiology services are carried out has changed and will keep evolving as medical and government guidelines adapt over time and patients look to digital care options. Our hearing healthcare procedures and those of the industry comply with the NHS, recent government guidelines on COVID-19, Infection Prevention Society, our professional audiology bodies, and the World Health Organisation (WHO). The precautions put in place throughout the industry makes audiology services possible in both clinics and home visiting.

Even in normal circumstances and hearing being one of the main senses we have - people who think they have some level of hearing loss still decide to wait around 7 years to seek any treatment or get a professional diagnosis. One can only imagine how these people feel in the current Coronavirus pandemic and how hearing health is perhaps not on their list of priorities. When in short, hearing well and staying connected matters now more than ever.

With the restrictions of the pandemic, those with hearing loss can feel the deep impact of isolation and what it truly means to experience loneliness. In some circumstances, some may not be able to pick up the phone so easily and speak to family or friends. Feeling connected to the world and those around us is important to maintain good mental health and combating anxiety, stress, and loneliness.

Talking in groups is a common challenge for those with hearing impairments, but with the introduction of social distancing, it evokes extra stresses and strains to already difficult hearing environments - leaving them feeling physically and mentally exhausted. Some social platforms that support the hearing loss community, who would normally help tackle loneliness, have been severed by the pandemic. Support groups have been forced to shut down completely or transition to online hubs – which is not convenient or accessible for some people and can have a negative effect on people's lives and mental health.

Those with untreated hearing loss will be more aware of their challenges and hearing impairment during this time. Delaying getting medical help can cause more damage to your hearing. As time goes on, without amplification or treatment, your perception of sound can change. Acknowledging your hearing difficulties and receiving early intervention will also help prevent further hearing problems. It ensures that the hearing nerves and auditory cortex are used properly and to their full potential.

As the virus has evolved, so has the audiology industry – offering not only 'safe as possible' home visits and clinic appointments, but now a proactive approach to providing digital care. Being person-centred is important in this industry and establishing the needs of our patients on various platforms has become essential during COVID-19. Providing many ways in which those who are worried about their hearing to seek the help they need in a way that suits them.

We understand that we are still living in unprecedented times, however, our hearing health care remains as vital as ever to maintain a good quality of life. It is important to remember that we and the industry continue to provide support, guidance, and hearing health care services you need now, and in whichever provision you choose.

If your hearing has changed and your existing hearing aids need adjusting or if you are worried that your hearing has altered recently - do not refrain from seeking help early. Here are some signs of hearing loss to look out for:

- Having to turn up the volume of your television or radio.
- Family members complaining about the volume of what you are listening to.
- Ringing, buzzing or hissing in your inner ears after being exposed to loud sounds.

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- Muffled sound after being exposed to loud sounds.
- When speech understanding is challenging in conversations.
- Asking people to repeat themselves more often.
- Difficulty with phone conversations.
- People stating that you are talking too loudly.
- Ringing in the ears.
- Not being able to hear household sounds like the doorbell.
- Ear pain.

> *"Many patients rely on audiological diagnosis, support, and intervention to remain connected and live well. This is even more important during the COVID-19 pandemic when people depend on phone and video calls to access essential services"* **BSHAA**

Hearing Aid UK recommends that anyone experiencing a lower level of hearing than normal or can relate to any of the symptoms above - to seek help and support as soon as possible by booking an appointment to see an audiologist. Early treatment and diagnosis of hearing loss are essential to prevent further damage to your hearing. For recent audiology guidelines and practice procedures, go to our 'Audiology Services During & After Coronavirus (COVID-19)' article here.

Hearing Aid UK is the largest UK professional audiology network – working with over 200 audiologists nationwide. The company is dedicated and passionate about providing excellent hearing healthcare services, products, and aftercare to their patients. For more information or to find an audiologist near you, visit www.hearingaid.org.uk

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