

Dispensing Audiologists—They Once Walked A Lonely Road

Twenty-five years ago, audiologists who heeded an inner call to help the hearing impaired through personal hands-on marketing of hearing instruments were labeled as “unethical” audiologists. They became pioneers in the field of dispensing audiology.

By Marjorie D. Skafta, editorial director

In the late sixties, Jim Curran, John Schuneman, Mel Sorkowitz and Otis Whitcomb had each received their masters degrees in audiology: Jim and Mel from the University of Wisconsin; Otis from Northern Illinois University and John from Western Michigan University. They were young, filled with enthusiasm and dedicated to the profession they had chosen. When they chose the field of audiology, none of them ever dreamed their careers would find their primary focus in hearing aids. They looked forward to helping individuals with communication difficulties through research in a speech and hearing clinic, a school system, or teaching in a university audiology department. These were the prime occupational opportunities available for someone with a degree in audiology at that time.

Somewhere along the way, however, each of them found he had a special interest in hearing aids. “Mel and I were both studying at the University of Wisconsin/Madison (UW) at that time,” Jim related. “We did a lot of talking together and more and more we became convinced that we could do more for the hearing impaired if, as audiologists, we continued the care of the patient through the entire testing, instrument selection, fitting and rehabilitation procedure.”

At that time, audiologists tested the hearing of individuals who came to speech and hearing clinics and made recommendations as to the preferred hearing aid. Patients then were referred to hearing instrument specialists (then called dealers) for purchase of the recommended instrument, fitting, etc.

“Our interest in the actual dispensing of hearing aids was furthered through contact with an individual Jim and I met in some of our classes—Don Schaefer, who is now deceased. Don was a pharmaceutical representative who noted that hearing aids were not available for purchase in the medical clinics. His interest in hearing loss and hearing aids led to his enrolling in audiology classes at UW in Madi-



Jim Curran



John Schuneman



Mel Sorkowitz



Otis Whitcomb

son,” Mel related. “Don believed that dispensing by audiologists was perfectly ethical and not a conflict of interest. We examined and debated this idea with him for months, and eventually came to believe that he was correct. This complete turnaround in our thinking even astonished us, for up until that time, we deeply believed that to dispense was unethical. The decision to dispense really was based on the logic of Don’s arguments. They were the foundation for our future actions and gave us the moral courage to go ahead,” Jim said. “Don had a vision. He was our mentor, our model, our investor, our financier,” Otis noted. “We all caught the Schaefer disease,” John added.

Thus was born the concept out of which Audiological Consultants, full service audiology centers in several cities that were owned and operated by audiologists, evolved. Don Schaefer set up the Dane County Hearing & Speech Center in Madison, WI. Mel established a center in Philadelphia, PA. Otis, a clinician at the University of Minnesota Hospitals audiology clinic, and Jim, who was from the Twin Cities, opened a center together in Minneapolis. John chose the Dearborn, MI, area, where he opened J.R. Schuneman & Associates. The centers were opened between 1968 and 1970 and were among the first offices in which audiologists openly marketed hearing

Editor’s Note: In 1994, dispensing of hearing instruments by individuals with degrees in Audiology is the norm. Thousands of audiologists now select, fit and sell thousands of hearing instruments each year. College audiology programs are being revised to include courses which specifically prepare students for entering the profession of hearing instrument dispensing. Audiologists who dispense hearing instruments even have their own association, the Academy of Dispensing Audiologists.

This article presents a brief look back into hearing healthcare history through the eyes of four audiologists, all with masters degrees, who heeded that call in the late ’60s. During the 1994 American Academy of Audiology annual convention, they reminisced with the editors of The Hearing Review about their experiences during the 10-year period when hearing instrument dispensing by audiologists was “unethical” and how those experiences changed the courses of their lives.

aids as a part of the services they offered. John, Jim, Otis and Mel were all members of the American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA). They said they were, of course, aware that the ASHA Code of Ethics prohibited its members from "engaging in commercial activities that conflict with their responsibilities to the persons they serve professionally or their colleagues."

We did what we did because we truly believed this was the way we could do more to help people with hearing loss, all four of the audiologists agreed. "We were naive, we were young, we were openly enthusiastic about the merits of our views relevant to dispensing of hearing aids. We talked to everyone about these beliefs. It was not a secret that we had opened dispensing offices," Jim pointed out.

Soon, thereafter, the calls came from the executive director of ASHA. Jim recalls the first words he heard, "I understand you are selling hearing aids, Jim." While he tried to explain his deep convictions relevant to better service to patients, Jim remembers the answer he received: "The first time you took money, Jim, you became unethical." Mel remembers yet being told that marketing of hearing aids presented a conflict of interest and that his involvement with the commercial world was unethical. Jim, Otis and Mel were all directed to relinquish their ASHA membership. John said he saw the writing on the wall and personally gave up his membership.

When asked how they felt when they could no longer be members of their professional association, they all expressed that they had feelings of rejection and bewilderment. "I felt like a leper," Mel said. "We were shunned by everyone. That included some hearing aid manufacturers, too. I remember that some companies would not sell us instruments because we were audiologists."

The rejection by their fellow audiologists, at least publicly, left them without individuals with whom they could discuss professional concerns. Many hearing aid specialists (dealers) didn't welcome this new source of competition and doubted an audiologist's ability to succeed as a dispenser. At first, members of the medical profession sent referrals, but as audiologists began working in medical offices, these referrals, too, were discontinued.

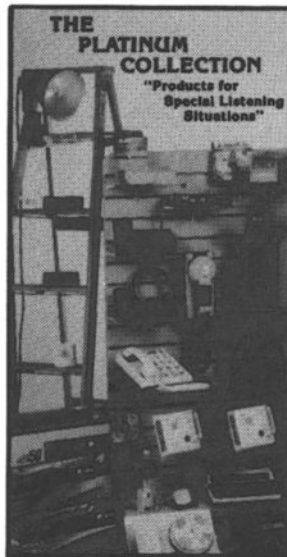
"We really were in a no-man's land," John observed. "I remember that I could not use the Audiological Consultants title in Michigan when I became licensed in that state."

It was almost 10 years before the pioneers among dispensing audiologists who operated in commercial offices and centers could again become "ethical" audiologists. Throughout the seventies, audiologist members of ASHA brought the subject of hearing instrument dispensing before the association's Legislative Council. The association's Position Paper and Resolution 13 were the subject of much discussion. Dispensing of hearing aids on a non-profit basis, under strict guidelines developed by ASHA, was approved in the mid-seventies. "In April, 1978, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, that a professional society's canon of ethics, that had the effect of limiting competition among its members, was illegal (U.S. v. National Society of Professional Engineers, 1978). ASHA consulted the U.S. attorney's office in Washington and was advised that they were vulnerable and probably in violation of the law by prohibiting the free enterprise of its membership. Two months later, in June, 1978, the ASHA Executive Board recommended a change in the association's Code of Ethics that would permit audiologists to engage in the retail sale of hearing aids."

What routes did the lives of Jim Curran, John Schuneman, Mel Sorkowitz, and Otis Whitcomb take following their momentous decisions in the '60s to dispense hearing instruments commercially? Jim left his doctoral studies at UW to dispense hearing instruments with Otis in

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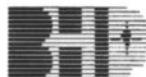
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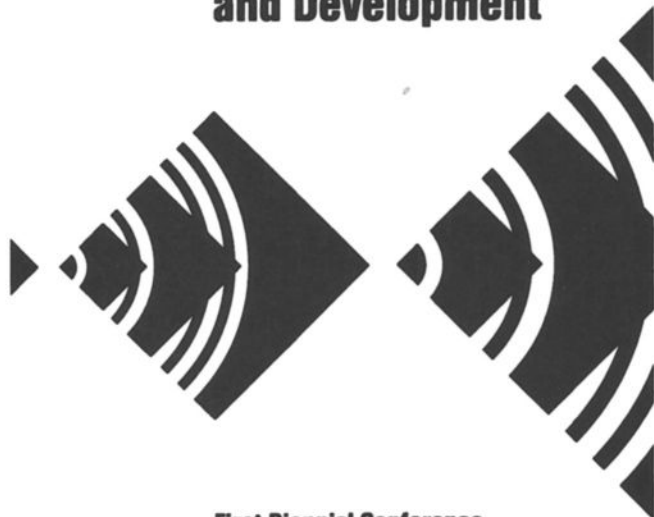
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Minneapolis. His ingrained love of teaching led him to join the staff of a hearing instrument manufacturing company. He has spent his career helping dispensers by sharing knowledge through hundreds of articles and lectures. Presently, he is associated with Starkey Laboratories and is a member of the Board of Directors of the American Academy of Audiology and on the executive board of the American Auditory Society.

Otis moved to Milwaukee, WI, in 1968 and opened an Audiological Consultants center on January 2, 1969. Here he established a successful practice and was later active in that state's National Hearing Aid Society's (now International Hearing Society) chapter, serving as its president for several years. He was a member of the Wisconsin hearing aid dispenser's licensing board for nine years. Otis is presently employed by Siemens Hearing Instruments, Inc., providing audiological support services for that company's Southern region. "We were among the first audiologists to learn the business side of operating a private practice. We have all tried to share this knowledge with our fellow dispensers," Otis pointed out.

Mel Sorkowitz presently has his own practice, Royal Palm Hearing Aid Center, in Boca Raton, FL, which he operates with his wife, Sondra. Mel has had private practices in Pennsylvania and California and was president of a hearing aid manufacturing company for a number of years. Throughout the years, Mel, too, has found many ways to share the knowledge he acquired through experience with his fellow audiologists as they have joined the thousands who now dispense. "Maybe it was loneliness that made us all so willing to share our experiences," Mel said. "We were in the forefront of dispensing during the years when lots of new ideas in hearing instrument selection and fitting evolved. We all utilized eyeglass hearing aids, CROS (Contralateral Routing of Sound) fittings in helping our patients, specifically for open canal amplification benefits."

John Schuneman is now with Toledo Clinic in Toledo, OH. He, too, has willingly shared his knowledge and experience with other members of the hearing care team. "Having the opportunity to work with our patients during the fitting process helped us develop expertise in the different types of selection and fitting methods as they developed. Open Canal Amplification, for example, provided new avenues of assistance. I remember presenting a paper on open canal amplification at the 78th Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology in 1973. Of course, I remember, too, the criticism that ensued because an audiologist who dispensed had been asked to make a presentation." John is presently working to receive his CCC.

The years of feeling ostracized are now a part of the distant past for Mel, John, Jim and Otis, however, memories of the sacrifices they and their families made and the struggles they encountered still remain. They now focus their energies on sharing their practical "know-how" and finding new ways to help people with hearing loss. ♦

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