

John:

Welcome to this edition of Patient Listening a Podcast service from Marshfield Clinic where we present health topics to you without all the technical jargon so you can get information that is easy to understand and useful to you in your everyday life. Hi, I'm your host John Tracy.

Communication skills are central to successfully managing our lives these days, especially with the introduction of cell phone technology. Seems just like a few short years those cell phones were a luxury item, but today it's more like a must have for most Americans.

But for many who suffer from hearing loss cell phones, iPods, and computers for that matter often present more of a challenge then perhaps they are worth or worse yet cannot be used at all.

All that has changed and here to help me explain is Christine Albertus from the Marshfield Clinic Minocqua Center. Chris, why don't you tell me a little about yourself?

Christine:

Well, my name is Christine Albertus and I am a doctor of audiology here at the Marshfield Clinic. I've been here for fifteen years, providing hearing services to the local community, dispensing hearing aids at the same time, and following along with all the trends in new devices that have been coming out.

John:

Ok, and as I've been sitting here, I've been thinking its kind of ironic that here we are producing an audio podcast for a population of people that up until recently haven't been able to use this technology to their advantage at all.

Christine:

Exactly!

John:

So Chris can you give me just a little history of what the conflict was between these personal audio devices like Ipods and cell phones, and a hearing aid?

Christine:

Well, most of it was just the technology was not compatible. We were using analog circuits and digitally programmable analog circuits that didn't connect to any of the Bluetooth or new or digital circuits that were out there. So there was just no connectivity and anytime you brought the instruments close together, because we are working with sound in a hearing aid, we would create feedback. Acoustic disturbances with cell phone, most particularly, you would put it up against your hearing aid and all you would get it a loud screaming sound and that makes it difficult for anyone to hear.

But with today's technology, they've introduced the Bluetooth into the hearing aid circuit. So now they are able to get the two instruments to work together and connect with each other and use like technologies so that they can use these different things.

John:

How recent is that development?

Christine:

Within the last probably year, year and a half that the technology has really come up. They have obviously been working at it for a while and there have been test patients and things like that using the instrumentation. But I would say within the last year and a half has really become a public awareness and on the market for a hearing aid user.

John:

In terms of switching over to one of these devices, is the patient going to really notice that great a difference between their traditional hearing aid and one of these new Bluetooth?

Christine:

Yeah, yeah. Even the, the hearing aid technology, the technology within the instruments designed to help their hearing loss is much more advanced. So in and of itself the hearing aid is a much more advanced circuit, going to do a much better job controlling the background noise, bringing out conversations, soft speech sounds, things like that we are aiming for in treating their hearing loss but then also opening up the rest of the world to them and allowing them to connect into today's modern devices so that they are not excluded from the everyday world that other people are using.

John:

Some of the objections that you get from the patients who are struggling with their hearing are possible the cosmetic look and feel of a hearing aid. What's the difference between, what do these ones look like?

Christine:

Well, the biggest thing I can tell everybody is these are not your parents or even your grandparent's hearing aids anymore. Everything is designed very small, very sleek and we now have open ear concepts where we don't even plug the ear with the device any longer. It's a very small, behind the ear instrument with just a very thin tube that runs inside your ear canal, leaving your ear canal very open so that you can still utilize a lot of your own natural hearing along with the benefit that the hearing aid is going to bring into you. Even the ones that do need to go in the ear due to the hearing loss, again we can get them down in size and to where they are very comfortable. We can have better venting because we do have better technology to control the feedback and things we couldn't do before. So it's a whole different world

Now to mention just with the digital alone, we are able to be much more customized to your specific hearing needs with a much more natural, true sound quality.

John:  
Is there a huge cost difference/cost shift from the analog type hearing aid to the digital?

Christine: Well yeah. You know I mean traditionally a pair of analog hearing aids, basic hearing aids would run you around twelve to fifteen hundred dollars for a pair. Now you are probably looking closer to spending anywhere from three to five thousand dollars for a pair to go along with the new technologies and new capabilities, and the ability to connect with the other devices.

John:  
So how does this all work? What brings it all together?

Christine:  
There is a device, it's either called a connector or one company calls it a streamer. It's a small, little thing no bigger than a pocket calculator sized device that is your link between your hearing aid and the other outside devices. The neat part about these guys is with a cell phone for example. You program the cell phone to the streamer or the streamer to the cell phone, and then when your phone rings you actually answer it through that device, you don't have to go pick up your phone. And you just push the button on the streamer that says phone and it answers the phone. There is a small micro streamer so you can just do your talking and it sends the signal to both of your ears so that you hear minor or stereo phone signal which makes it much easier for the hearing impaired to follow the conversation. Your phone can be up to 75 or 90 feet away from you at the time. You don't have to pull it out of your purse; you don't have to hold it. Plus that device plus your hearing aids kind of take the place of it, it just needs to be within the vicinity to answer it. It hardwires into a computer so you have that device sitting near you, plug it through a typical USB cable type thing into your computer, to your Ipod, you know those types of things and it just runs everything through that.

John:  
So any multimedia I want to watch on the internet or...

Christine:  
Yup!

John:  
Super. How difficult is it for people to program all this stuff? Is it tricky?

Christine:  
It's not real tricky, but you know like most of us that are maybe over forty it's a little harder than those that are under forty. But they give a real easy outline in the instructions that shows you with your phone and that device it's a few simple steps and it really is pretty simple. I think the biggest thing, like I said before the biggest thing is just remembering it is very different. Things have changed incredibly in the last few years

when it comes to hearing instruments, hearing aids. So you can't, or we don't want you to judge it on somebody else's experience. You really want to come in and find out for yourself, for your hearing loss, what is going to work for you.

John:

Well that's funny because while I was sitting in hear I looked up at one of your comic strips up there and it shows a guy with great big wings hanging off the side of his head, and he said he got his first hearing aids in 1957 when they were still using the chrome and big fins were really in that year. What a long way we've come.

Christine:

Oh yes.

John:

Chris, thank you very much for your time.

Christine:

You're welcome.

John:

Marshfield Clinic offers Audiology services at numerous locations throughout central, north central west and northwest Wisconsin.

To find out more on the latest hearing aid technology or any of our audiology services visit our web site at [marshfieldclinic.org](http://marshfieldclinic.org) and search for hearing aids or audiology.

On behalf of Christine Albertus at the Minocqua Center, I'm John Tracy, thanks for downloading Patient Listening.

Patient Listening is a podcast service of Marshfield Clinic and is produced by the Corporate Communications Department.