



## International Hearing Society

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March 30, 2004

The Wall Street Journal  
200 Liberty Street  
New York, NY 10281

Dear Editor:

On behalf of the International Hearing Society (IHS), I write with regard to the March 24, 2004 article, "*The Noisy Debate Over Hearing Aids: Why So Expensive?*" IHS commends the Journal and the article's author, Ann Zimmerman, for drawing attention to hearing health and hearing aids and for appropriately recognizing that hearing loss is the third most common chronic health condition in older people and that those with untreated hearing loss are more likely to suffer depression, anxiety and paranoia.

Regrettably, however, the article fails to appropriately reflect the critical role that hearing testing and evaluation along with *counseling* and *rehabilitation* play in a successful hearing aid fitting. Indeed, hearing testing and evaluation, counseling and rehabilitation by a licensed hearing health professional (audiologist, hearing aid specialist, physician) is absolutely essential in order for the hearing aid user to fully benefit from the aid.

Hearing aids are not analogous to eyeglasses. They are complex medical devices, particularly with the advent of sophisticated digital technology. Each potential hearing aid user has not only a unique hearing loss but each potential hearing aid user also has a unique home and work environment in which to utilize the hearing aid. Individualized testing, fitting and counseling by a licensed hearing health professional is absolutely vital in order for a hearing impaired individual to fully benefit from amplification.

The article incorrectly purports that one of the main reasons for underutilization of hearing aids is their high cost and that, as advocated in a citizen petition to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) submitted by Mead Killion, making hearing aids available over the counter would increase utilization by lowering cost. The truth of the matter is that despite the current FDA regulatory structure, many lower cost hearing aid like devices are presently available through the internet and through mail order sales and other outlets. In light of the aggressive promotional campaigns that tout these products, if cost were as significant a consideration as the article leads the reader to believe, then many more Americans would be buying these instruments.

In reality, the fact that only 20 percent of those who could benefit from amplification actually use a device is much more complicated. Indeed, market research has revealed far more complex reasons for this underutilization than price, including the gradual nature of hearing loss, the stubbornness of potential users, a negative association with aging, prior use of an ineffective device, as well as unrealistic expectations.

The FDA acted appropriately when it swiftly denied the citizen petitions. IHS hopes that hearing-impaired persons who read your article won't be discouraged from seeking help because of incomplete pricing information, but will instead seek the proven benefits of hearing aid technology and associated rehabilitation and counseling.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robin Clowers". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Robin L. Clowers, BC-HIS  
Executive Director

CC: Ann Zimmerman