

The Future of Audiology: An Optimistic Perspective

By James W. Hall III, PhD

Listen in on conversations at a gathering of audiologists or on an audiology email list, and you're sure to hear concerns expressed about the future of audiology. The perceived problems facing the profession are difficult and diverse.

A short list of the challenges includes diminishing reimbursement for services, limited direct patient access to audiologists, poor consumer awareness of audiology, excessive emphasis on the sale of products versus provision of service, hearing aid dispensing competition from big-box companies, corporate buyouts of independent audiology practices, threats to audiology autonomy from physician groups, infighting among audiology professional organizations, insufficient numbers of audiologists entering the field to offset attrition of practicing audiologists, and weaknesses in the graduate education of audiology students.

I must offer a disclaimer before suggesting solutions to these problems. I am an unabashed optimist or, more precisely, an idealistic pragmatist. In my opinion, audiology as a profession can, with bold and well-coordinated efforts made simultaneously on many fronts, secure and assure a bright future.

I suggest a handful of fundamental strategies for addressing the most commonly stated concerns about the future of audiology. In the 1950s and 1960s, luminaries like Raymond Carhart, James Jerger, and others built the profession of audiology on a solid research foundation. We must renew our emphasis on basic and clinical research in support of best practices.

"Today, knowledge has power. It controls access to opportunity and advancement."—Peter Drucker


Audiologists must control the accreditation of university programs responsible for the rigorous basic, clinical, and business education of independent practitioners. With a unified voice, we must clearly articulate and consistently adhere to common core values and tirelessly push for professional autonomy in access to and reimbursement for services.

In addition, audiologists must function within a global network that maintains an appropriate and mutually beneficial relationship with industry.

Finally, the field must focus almost exclusively on the provision of comprehensive, evidence-based clinical services, with the goal of improving communication skills and quality of life for our pediatric and adult patients rather than simply selling a product at a profit.

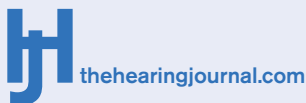
Audiologists should emphasize the clinical services they are uniquely qualified to provide and regularly ask patients and patients' parents variations of the following rather straightforward questions:

Do you simply want to purchase an inexpensive hearing aid, or do you want to ...

- Communicate effectively?
- Be happier and healthier, and enjoy better quality of life?
- Avoid falls while maintaining mobility and independence?
- Assure that your child develops normal communication skills and has a chance to succeed in school?
- No longer perceive that annoying and bothersome tinnitus? 



Dr. Hall is a member of *The Hearing Journal* Editorial Advisory Board and professor at the Salus University George S. Osborne College of Audiology.



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The Hearing Journal
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