



AMERICAN
SPEECH-LANGUAGE-
HEARING
ASSOCIATION



May 15, 2012

Mary O'Dowd, BA, MPH
State Health Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services
PO Box 360
369 S. Warren St.
Trenton, NJ 08625-0360

Dear Ms. O'Dowd,

We are writing you today to ask for your assistance in advising consumers who suspect that they have hearing loss to seek a comprehensive hearing evaluation by a licensed hearing healthcare professional prior to purchasing hearing aids over-the-counter or through the Internet. National and international professional organizations dedicated to hearing healthcare issued the attached joint statement in February 2012 related to this issue. The statement highlights both the "health and efficacy concerns about the use of consumer-administered hearing tests and the direct sale of hearing aids to the consumer without the involvement of a licensed hearing health professional – an audiologist, hearing aid specialist, or otolaryngologist." The joint statement further notes that a medical evaluation by a licensed physician is also recommended for adults prior to a hearing aid purchase.

The potential risks that result from the omission of a comprehensive hearing evaluation and treatment by a licensed hearing healthcare professional include failure to detect an underlying medical cause of the hearing loss, additional hearing loss as a result of improper fitting and/or programming of hearing aids, and ear trauma sustained as the result of improper fitting and/or insertion of ear molds or hearing aids. Hearing aid sales and delivery models that circumvent the hearing healthcare professional also pose financial risks to consumers because they are more likely to purchase unnecessary or inappropriate devices.

There are many possible causes of hearing loss including: aging, cerumen impaction, ear infection, genetic disorders, head injury, ototoxic medication, Meniere's Disease, noise exposure, otosclerosis, and acoustic/vestibular tumors. Some of these conditions may require referral for medical or surgical intervention; however, individuals who purchase hearing aids through the Internet or over-the-counter will not have the benefit of the licensed hearing healthcare provider to identify any potential problems prior to purchase.

Many state laws also recognize the importance of consumer protection and safety by placing restrictions on the dispensing of hearing aids by direct mail and/or the Internet. On October 26, 2011, the Minnesota Department of Health released a statement stressing the importance of seeing a hearing healthcare practitioner for hearing loss and advised that failure to do so “skirts state and federal legal protections and could result in harm.” You may access the full release here: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/news/pressrel/2011/hearing102611.html> .

It is our hope that the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services will issue a similar notice to consumers in your state. As you may know, the month of May has been designated nationally as Better Hearing and Speech Month and will provide an excellent opportunity for you to communicate this important information to your constituents.

Please contact us anytime if we can be of service in providing additional information and resources about this important issue.

Thank you in advance for your consideration,

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Enclosure: Joint Statement on Consumer-Administered Hearing Tests and Direct-to-Consumer Hearing Aid Sales