

Audiology Australia's Primary Health Care Position Statement

Summary

Audiologists are university qualified to provide holistic hearing care to the Australian population. The Australian community will benefit if audiologists are recognised as the professional leaders in this increasingly important area of health care.

There are very real differences between audiology and audiometry. The university qualifications of audiologists mean that audiologists are the practitioners that should lead hearing health care in Australia. Full diagnosis of hearing loss and hearing rehabilitation are within the domain of audiology but not audiometry.

1. Audiologists are extensively trained in selecting, carrying out and interpreting the full range of hearing assessments. They are well placed to determine whether patients require medical intervention or require hearing rehabilitation services.
2. Hearing rehabilitation is often, erroneously, equated with the fitting of hearing devices (such as hearing aids or cochlear implants). Thus, it is seen to be a largely technical service requiring little more than technical know how. Increasingly, evidence based research is demonstrating that an exclusively technical approach does not produce an acceptable level of assistance for many people with hearing loss. Audiologists are appropriately qualified to identify the need for more extensive hearing rehabilitation and provide such care where appropriate.

In Australia's primary health care system, audiologists should be the primary health practitioners for people with hearing loss and related disorders.

The differences between audiology and audiometry:

Audiology and audiometry are often confused in the public's mind. When the educational backgrounds of audiologists and audiometrists are compared, it is clear there are both qualitative and quantitative differences in training that impact upon the respective abilities of audiologists and audiometrists. By virtue of their university education, audiologists possess the professional skills needed to **apply** relevant knowledge and skills to a range of audiological cases. Hearing aid audiometrists undergo a vocational program at TAFE. They are trained to have good technical skills that enable them to perform a battery of hearing tests and fit hearing aids to clients.

What are professional skills?

Professional or generic skills are taught throughout an undergraduate degree and developed further throughout a Masters degree and include:

- *high-level evaluative and problem-solving skills* [to identify the most appropriate test battery for the individual *and* to integrate clinical information from various sources (reports from medical or paramedical practitioners, test outcomes and client history)],
- *high-level communication skills which require self-awareness and interpersonal skills* [for effective and culturally-sensitive patient-professional interaction as well as interaction with other professionals];
- *highly developed written skills* [for medico-legal reporting as well as reporting to individuals with various educational levels].
- *self-management and collaboration skills* [to ensure holistic client management];
- *critical analysis skills to apply and adapt knowledge to the real world* [to ensure effective client outcomes both in the diagnosis and rehabilitation]
- *creative thinking skills* [to develop rehabilitation plans that provide clients with opportunities to participate effectively in society]; and
- *lifelong learning skills to stay abreast of the rapidly evolving technology and changes to best practice.*

(i) Qualitative differences- "professional skill" development; By far the most important distinction between audiology and audiometry qualifications is due to the fact that audiologist training recognises and exploits the development of generic or professional skills (see text box). Audiologists require a Bachelor degree before they are accepted into a Master of Clinical Audiology program. Undergraduate degrees are oriented towards providing students with generic/professional skills. Professional skills are developed further in Master of Clinical Audiology programs.

In contrast, audiometrists are required to have completed Year 12 before they are accepted into a TAFE course. Audiometry

qualifications are based upon ensuring students receive and retain knowledge that is technically oriented.

(ii) Quantitative differences- breadth and depth of knowledge: Audiology students receive tuition in a broader range of subjects than audiometry students. Audiology students develop an in-depth understanding of key areas including acoustics, ear anatomy and physiology, hearing loss prevention, phonetics, hearing aid features and functions, the effects of hearing loss in terms of activity limitations and participation restrictions and evidence based rehabilitation strategies. In contrast, teaching in audiometry focuses upon equipping students with sufficient knowledge and skill to carry out a battery of hearing tests and carry out hearing aid fitting procedures (i.e knowing "how" rather than knowing "why".)

Diagnosis of hearing disorders:

The initial assessment itself requires complex decision-making processes to occur throughout the appointment. In particular, the practitioner must decide how to conduct each test to provide the information that is required. This is in order to determine whether further assessment is required or whether hearing rehabilitation may proceed. The interpretation of the clinical findings requires in-depth integration of the presenting history, the audiometric information and observations made about the client's behaviours.

Knowledge of, and the skill and expertise to provide, a comprehensive test battery is required to appropriately conduct an audiological assessment of the client's needs. This is because no single audiometric test can provide sufficient information to determine the site-of-lesion or the magnitude of the impairment (including the impact on an individual's ability to recognise speech). While to a novice, the types of tests undertaken within an initial assessment may be considered relatively standard for each initial assessment, in fact, there are a number of decisions that the practitioner must make throughout this appointment. Therefore only audiologists are able to provide this independently.

Hearing rehabilitation:

There have been rapid advances in hearing device technology over the last 20 years and, particularly, over the last 10 years. These advances have been accompanied by a belief that hearing loss can be "fixed" by the application of appropriate technology. However, evidence based research shows that hearing devices alone do not produce satisfactory rehabilitation outcomes for many people. However, research also shows that strategies other than device fitting (such as counseling, communication training and group rehabilitation) enhance performance for many clients.

Appropriate rehabilitation cannot and should not be provided by a formulaic approach as it needs to be highly individualised. Audiologists but not audiometrists have this potential because of their professional training at university and their thorough understanding of the psychosocial impacts of hearing loss.

The potential role of audiologists in primary health care:

In an updated hearing health care system, it is proposed that audiologists are the primary health practitioners for people with hearing loss and related disorders. Audiologists would provide full diagnostic hearing assessment to individuals with hearing loss and determine the individual's need for medical and/or rehabilitative intervention. Audiologists have considerably more in-depth knowledge than GPs in predicting the likely effectiveness of hearing rehabilitation and in identifying medical indicators from client report or test results and, as such, are able to make independent decisions about whether to proceed with hearing rehabilitation or medical referral. Audiologists would be responsible for the case management of patients requiring hearing rehabilitation, including hearing aids. Audiometrists would continue to play a role in hearing health care, working under the direction of audiologists, carrying out basic hearing tests and fitting hearing aids.