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Comment: It's time to get hearing-aid users in the loop

Janis Ringuette

Victoria could become one of Canada's friendliest communities for people with hearing loss by installing a simple, inexpensive technology in public places. Telecoil hearing-loop systems dramatically increase accessibility for the hard-of-hearing.

In large, open spaces like churches and meeting rooms, where sound bounces off high ceilings and distant walls, echoes produced are picked up by hearing aids. People wearing hearing aids feel socially isolated at public events because they can't understand what's being said. As hearing declines, the natural response is to avoid those situations, give up and stay home.

Installing hearing loops solves that problem. A copper wire is "looped" around the periphery of a counter or a room and connected to the sound system. The loop transmits sound electromagnetically from microphones directly to hearing aids and cochlear implants that are equipped with a tiny copper telecoil wire. Background noise is diminished.

Telecoil is a old technology, but is more effective and convenient than other systems that broadcast FM or infrared signals to headphones because no extra equipment is necessary. Those who don't wear hearing aids are unaffected and unaware of the transmission.

Telecoils work somewhat like Wi-Fi for hearing aids, enabling them to serve as customized, wireless loudspeakers, says David Myers, a U.S. psychology professor and telecoil advocate. A hearing loop system transmits directly to hearing aids and requires only the push of a button for people to tune in.

When Myers switched on his hearing aid's telecoil setting for the first time in a Scottish church, "the sudden clarity was overwhelming," he said. "It was like going from a rough gravel road to fresh asphalt."

In Europe, loop systems are common at customer-service counters, theatres, churches and even airports. In the U.K., where access for the hearing disabled is required by law, most post offices and 11,500 taxis are looped. In North America, we are far behind. In an effort to promote loops in the U.S. and Canada, the Hearing Loss Association of America and the American Academy of Audiology recently launched an educational campaign called "Get in the Hearing Loop."

Hearing loss is a major and growing problem. One in 10 Canadians has hearing loss — more than those who have vision problems. It is one of the most common conditions present at birth; about 16 per cent of school-aged children have hearing loss.

The number of Canadians with age-related hearing loss is staggering. Janet Holland, audiologist at the Island Deaf and Hard of Hearing Centre, a non-profit society with offices in downtown Victoria, points out that hearing loss is the third-most-common disabling condition for seniors after arthritis and hypertension. One-third of those 65 to 74 years of age have hearing loss. One-half of those age 75 and older have hearing loss.

Holland compares barriers preventing access for people in wheelchairs with barriers encountered by people wearing hearing aids. Wheelchairs work well on the flat, roll along easily, but don't work when they hit curbs. Hearing aids work well in quiet, small settings but don't work in public places with background noise.

Our communities are more aware of mobility challenges, which are visible, but less aware of hearing disabilities, which are invisible. Just as we provide ramp and elevator access for those in wheelchairs, we should provide hearing-loop access for those with hearing aids. In both cases, removal of barriers increases accessibility in public areas for people with disabilities.

In Victoria, Vancity Credit Union is leading the way. After a successful pilot program looping customer service counters at three branches in Greater Victoria, Vancity decided to install counter loops in all 56 branches. Visitors are welcome to drop into any office to check out some of the first loop systems operating in the region. The high-quality installations by Advanced Listening Systems, a local company, cost about \$500 for each customer service counter. For a meeting room, the cost would be \$3,000 to \$5,000, depending on size and situation.

Loop systems are needed in senior centres, churches, meeting rooms, theatres, city halls, banks, ticket counters, doctors' offices, hospital rooms and care facilities. When hearing loops in public places are as common here as they are in Europe, our city and region will be truly welcoming and accessible to the hard of hearing.

Janis Ringuette is a local historian. Her husband's severe hearing loss inspired her advocacy campaign to increase accessibility for the hearing impaired in public areas.

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