

HEARING AID MANAGEMENT SERVICES Q&A

20 May 2016

Integrated Aural Rehabilitation Trial

Q Information from Enable New Zealand noted that Enable New Zealand would be working with Hearing Therapy Services of Life Unlimited to trial 'an integrated aural rehabilitation approach'. Who are Hearing Therapy Services and why are they involved in Hearing Aid Management services?

A Hearing Therapy Services is a service of Life Unlimited. <http://www.lifeunlimited.net.nz>

The Hearing Therapy Service is provided under a contract with the Ministry of Health and is a free service to people, 16 years and over, who have hearing loss. Hearing Therapy Services employ qualified Hearing Therapists who hold the NZQA-registered National Diploma in Hearing Therapy. They are able to carry out hearing needs assessments with a focus on the psychosocial impact of hearing loss, offer information, advice, and teach strategies to manage living with a hearing loss. They refer people to Audiology services for diagnostic assessment as required, and for hearing aid fitting where benefit of amplification is indicated and if this is the person's choice. Hearing Therapists cannot prescribe or fit hearing aids, but will advise people on the options available to them.

Hearing Therapists are members of the Hearing Therapist Association of New Zealand (HTANZ) and adhere to a Code of Practice. They are committed to supporting audiological practice.

Q Why did Enable New Zealand and Life Unlimited think there was a need for any change to the current processes and practices?

Although the Ministry has traditionally purchased both Hearing Therapy Services and Hearing Aid Management Services, they have been purchased separately with little integration between them.

International research provides evidence to support a holistic aural rehabilitation approach whereby hearing aid fittings are supplemented by a range of Hearing Therapy strategies to enhance and support their use. The research highlights the opportunity to more closely align Hearing Therapy Services and Audiology Services (provided within Hearing Aid Management Services), to deliver a collaborative and holistic aural rehabilitation approach.

Enable New Zealand and Life Unlimited referred to the considerable evidence base to guide the development of the proposal to the Ministry of Health.

Research indicates that 80% of adults aged 55-74 years who would benefit from wearing a hearing aid do not acquire them, and that many who do acquire them do not wear them (McCormack et al, 2013; Chisolm et al, 2007).

A 2011 study by Rebecca Kelly-Campbell, University of Canterbury, indicates that aural rehabilitation that addresses the psychosocial impact of hearing impairment (e.g. through hearing therapy), as well as the functional impact (through fitting and use of a hearing aid and/or other assistive technology), can reduce the perception of hearing problems and increase the use of communication strategies and use of the hearing aid.

Participation in an aural rehabilitation programme, accompanied by use of a hearing aid, provides more benefit, and is more cost-effective than a hearing aid alone (Abrams et al, 2002).

The other concern, which is often raised anecdotally in New Zealand, is the rate of abandonment of hearing aids soon after their prescription. There are no validated statistics on this in New Zealand and the reported rate of abandonment varies markedly (from 4.7% to 24%) depending on the country or jurisdictions from which the data is derived. Therefore it has been proposed that perceived benefit in this area will be monitored by the percentage of people who continue to use their hearing aids daily and on an ongoing basis.

Q Will this approach be introduced across the country from 1 July?

A No. This approach will be developed as a service trial and will be overseen by a project team, with ongoing advice and feedback from a Sector Reference Group that is to be established.

The scope and details of the service trial are yet to be fully developed. The project team has been established and over the next few weeks will begin developing the project plan, and further define the scope of the service trial. This will be reviewed and approved by the Ministry of Health before proceeding later this year.

It is envisaged however, that in those regions where strong relationships currently exist between Hearing Therapy Services and Audiology providers, these will be leveraged to assist the development of the service approach to be tested in the service trial.

Q Will Enable New Zealand and Hearing Therapy Services (Life Unlimited) work with NZAS and others to develop the service trial?

A Yes. A key aspect of the proposal to the Ministry of Health included the intention to develop a Sector Reference Group, providing expert consultation and guidance to the project team to assist in developing and monitoring the service trial. It is envisaged that the Sector Reference Group will comprise nominated representatives from a range of entities and peak bodies including (but not limited to) New Zealand Audiological Society, Deaf Aotearoa, Grey Power, DeafBlind NZ Inc., National Foundation of the Deaf, Hearing Association, and the Hearing Therapists Association of New Zealand.

Q What are the objectives of the service trial?

A The key objective of the service trial is to develop and test a service approach that aligns the respective skills and expertise of Audiology providers and Hearing Therapy services to deliver better outcomes for people with hearing loss, aged 16 years and over. This is intended to facilitate a more holistic approach to comprehensive aural rehabilitation. The conceptual basis, and driver for developing an integrated service approach, is the current body of research and literature that indicates considerable benefit could be derived for people with hearing loss, and for the funder, if a greater level of integration existed between these disciplines.

Q How will the outcomes be measured and evaluated?

A An evaluation framework has been developed in line with Ministry of Health contractual requirements. It is based on Results Based Accountability (RBA) methodology (<http://www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/what-we-do/streamlined-contracting/results-based-accountability>) and identifies a number of measures that will explore three key questions as follows: “How much did we do?”, “How well did we do it?” and “Is anyone better off?”.

The Ministry of Health has already approved a number of outcome measures and benchmarks for ongoing evaluation of the adult aural rehabilitation service managed by Life Unlimited. These may be added to with input from the Sector Reference Group, and applied to the combined Hearing Therapy, Audiology service trial, with agreement from the Ministry.

It is anticipated that an independent review and evaluation of the service trial will be undertaken at twelve months and then eighteen months from the start date.

Q What are the operational implications?

A In the first instance there will be no impact for most Audiology providers. In those areas where the service trial is undertaken there may be some changes to referral processes. These will be defined as the project is fully scoped and there will be full engagement with all key stakeholders to ensure they are acceptable and well understood.

Q There are some conditions and / or signs and symptoms that Audiologists are trained to detect and diagnose and for which they refer on to an ENT Specialist (Otolaryngologist). These can be indicators of life threatening conditions. What happens in this referral pathway if a hearing therapist misses key signs and symptoms?

Hearing Therapists currently refer people to Audiologists and other health professionals for diagnostic assessment where required and in accordance with Hearing Therapy practice guidelines. However an aspect of the project planning will be to work with the Sector Reference Group and particularly with NZAS to ensure that clear referral protocols and processes for the service trial are agreed.