

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN AUDIOLOGIST & A HEARING INSTRUMENT SPECIALIST?

by Ted Venema PhD
Coordinator HIS Program
Conestoga College
Kitchener, Ontario
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There has been some concern from the hearing health care professions and from the public lately, regarding advertisements that seek to promote the profession of Audiology while at the same time, demote the Hearing Instrument Specialist (HIS) profession. While there is nothing wrong with promoting, one has to wonder why it is done by trying to push another party down. Let's look objectively at 1) the scopes of practice of each profession, and 2) the education programs of these two professions. Not to be forgotten is a 3rd fact; Audiologists are relatively few in number. Without the HIS, we cannot meet the hearing health care needs of the bulging baby boomer population, especially in smaller cities and towns.

1. Scopes of Practice

Of the two professions, the Audiologist definitely has the larger, more comprehensive scope of practice. The Audiologist is trained to test hearing in all human populations, from infants, to mentally disabled, to those who willfully do not want to reveal their true hearing status, in addition to the mainstream elderly adult. The Audiologist in particular possesses skills in performing objective, non-behavioral test procedures necessary for testing infants who cannot tell you what they hear. Other specialized tests that fall within the Audiologist's scope of practice are done for the specific purpose of finding the "site of lesion" in an individual. There is a sleuth-like process here, one in which the Audiologist has been specifically trained. Of course, the Audiologist also receives training in the more routine aspects of hearing aid prescription, counseling, and subsequent fitting for the mainstream adult population.

In comparison, the HIS has a smaller scope of practice, one that is generally limited to the mainstream adult population. Pediatric hearing testing of infants is not within the HIS scope of practice. For the general adult population, the HIS is trained to test hearing, to refer to other hearing health care professionals when necessary, and to recommend

and fit hearing aids. This adult population can aptly be served by either the HIS or Audiologist. It should also be noted that the general mainstream adult population is huge, and accounts for the vast majority of hearing-impaired people. What's more, this population is one that is particularly accessible to the potentially lucrative area of private practice. The simple fact is that the HIS and Audiologist are both professionals whose scopes of practice overlap considerably.

Only in Ontario, there is a difference within this area of overlap, and that is in the controlled act of "Prescribing." While the HIS tests someone's hearing, and then recommends specific hearing aids for a client, the HIS is still required to get a Physician's hearing aid prescription. The Audiologist, on the other hand, can prescribe hearing aids. In other provinces, this is not the case. The bottom line is that the HIS is a college-trained professional who is well equipped to test hearing, recommend, and dispense hearing aids with no ensuing harm to the public.

2. Education of the Two Professions

The Audiologist has at least Masters Degree level university training. Much has been made of the fact that Audiologists spend 6-7 years studying for their profession, while the HIS does not. There are two things to note here:

While it is true that Audiologists do take this long to complete their required Masters Degree in Audiology, it is not true that all 6-7 years are spent studying Audiology. An honours Bachelors degree takes 4 years and a Masters degree takes another 2-3 years. There is no such thing as a Bachelors Degree in Audiology. In fact, most students studying Audiology at the Masters level hold Bachelors degrees in different areas, such as Psychology, Linguistics, Music, Math, etc. Once accepted into a Masters level Audiology training program, students then face 2-3 years of training in Audiology. The first year is commonly a "preparatory" year, and the next 2 years are spent in specific training in Audiology.

Most Audiology students first heard about the field of Audiology while earning the Bachelors Degree; toward the end of their Bachelor's studies they became aware of a real occupation that could be realized with continued studies at university at the graduate level for another couple of years. Most Audiologists did not come out of Grade 12 thinking, "I want to become an Audiologist, and so I am going to school for 6-7 years to do this."

The HIS arrives in the same arena of hearing health care as the Audiologist, but comes from college training, not university training. Anyone who knows the differences here knows that unlike universities, colleges are mandated to train for vocations and applied skills, not for research.

Here too, a couple of things should be noted:

In the areas of hearing, hearing loss, and hearing aids, the length of study time for the HIS is almost equivalent to that of the Audiologist. At George Brown College (Ontario) and Rosemont College (Quebec), the Full time HIS program takes 3 years. At Conestoga College (Ontario) and Grant MacEwen College (Alberta), the Full time training is more densely packed into a 2 year length of time. Furthermore, these 2–3 years are spent in training specifically for mainstream adult hearing testing and hearing aid fitting. There are courses in pediatric testing, or other specialized test procedures. A typical HIS training curriculum includes courses in acoustics, anatomy of the ear, at least 2 courses in the assessment and testing of hearing, 3 courses in hearing aid technology, selection and fitting, a course in counseling, as well as a course in professional ethics. The audiology program at the University of Western Ontario, for example, does not provide more training in these areas.

Some HIS students begin their studies at college just having finished secondary school. More often, however, the applicant for HIS studies is a mature student, who has decided that in their particular stage of life, the hearing health care field is an interesting one. In a typical HIS class of students, many come from universities, having Bachelors, Masters, or Medical degrees from other countries. Some of them may have applied to get into an Audiology training program at a university, but due to the often lengthy, complex application process to these programs, were denied entry. The colleges provide readily-accessible HIS training for them. It is heartening to see that they have another route whereby to enter the hearing health care profession.

In summary, there is a college route or a university route whereby to study the hearing health field. The university trained Audiologist definitely has more options than the college trained HIS. Besides going into clinical employment, another option is to remain in school, complete a research-intended PhD degree, and become a professor and researcher. The HIS, on the other hand, has a diploma in an “applied” field of study.

It is not true that the Audiologist has adequate training and the HIS does not. There is simply more than one venue from which the public can

choose for mainstream adult hearing health care concerns. In the final analysis, the amount of hearing training for the HIS is almost equivalent to that of the Audiologist!

As for me, my Masters Degree and PhD are both in Audiology, and my Bachelors degree is in Philosophy. I have taught at two Audiology programs (at Auburn University in Alabama and at The University of Western Ontario) and two HIS programs (George Brown College in Toronto and Conestoga College in Kitchener). My experience teaching both university students in Audiology and college students in the Hearing Instrument Specialist field puts me in a good position to know and understand the curricula of both educational systems.

3. Meeting Hearing Health care Needs with the Two Professions

The University of Western Ontario has one of two Audiology programs in Ontario (the other being at the University of Ottawa, a largely Francophone program whose graduates practice mostly around the Ottawa valley). In Canada, Western has the largest Audiology program by far; yet it produces about 15 graduates per year. On the other hand, the HIS program at George Brown College produces some 20–30 HIS graduates per year. The new HIS program at Conestoga College has accepted a total of 37 students as of this September (07).

Today's hearing health care needs to address vast numbers of the aging population with hearing impairment, especially when we consider the imminent bulge of the aging baby boomers. The hearing health care needs of the public can be met by the combined presence of both the HIS and the Audiologist. Furthermore, the HIS, more than the Audiologist, is likely to be found in smaller communities. Given these facts, we need to work together!

About Ted Venema...

Ted Venema earned a BA in Philosophy at Calvin College in 1977, and an MA in Audiology at Western Washington University in 1988. He completed a PhD in Audiology at the University of Oklahoma in 1993. He was an Assistant Professor at Auburn University in Alabama for the next two years. From 1995 until 2001, he worked at Unitron Hearing, where he conducted field trials on new hearing

aids and gave presentations, domestically and abroad. During these years from 1995 until 2004 he taught in the Hearing Instrument Specialist (HIS) program at George Brown College in Toronto. From 2001 until 2006, Ted was an Assistant Professor of Audiology at the University of Western Ontario. In 2005, he developed and coordinates Canada's 4th and most recent HIS program, at Conestoga College in Kitchener, Ontario. He continues to give outside presentations on hearing loss and hearing aids. Ted is the author of a textbook, *Compression for Clinicians*, published by Thomson Delmar Learning, and this book has been re-written, updated, and revised as a 2nd edition in 2006.