

The quiet revolution in NHS hearing aids

As a result of strenuous technical testing and user scrutiny, audiologists in England and Wales can offer the hearing aids you've been calling for, at a price the NHS can afford.

Behind the scenes there's been a revolution in the hearing aids available to NHS patients in England and Wales.

The NHS spends around £56 million every year on hearing aids. New contracts were awarded last year and, where previously only standard behind-the-ear models were available, now a wider selection of styles is on offer. However, what seems the most attractive style may not be the most suitable for your particular hearing loss and practical needs. Your audiologist will advise you on suitable options. You should also think about how easy the hearing aids will be to use – and ask about their robustness.

There are now more sizes and colours. There are multifunctional programmes to help you hear better – whether you're in a football stadium or listening to the TV at home. New developments in technology help you communicate with friends, family and workmates.

For the gadget-happy among you, some models now offer the option of accessories (privately purchased) that enable remote control and 'Bluetooth' wireless connection to mobile phones and music players.

NHS Supply Chain Audiology Buyer, Hayley Calder, explains: "Patients' needs were at the forefront of these changes. People need hearing aids that allow them to enjoy life to the full. This requires not only better technology and design, but also wider choice. So the Department of Health agreed new product specifications which manufacturers had to meet, and target costs to keep prices down."

Patients' needs were at the forefront of these changes



Thorough evaluation

NHS Supply Chain then used its expertise in procurement to lead one of the most thorough contract evaluations ever undertaken.

Hayley adds: "The first stage saw each hearing aid model 'put through its paces' technically by our advisers in the Audiology Supply Group – experts with a real understanding of the clinical issues as well as the innovative products on the market. Each supplier was also invited to present and answer comprehensive questions about their products.

"There were also three focus groups jointly arranged by RNID (now Action on Hearing Loss) and the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) where people with hearing loss gave feedback on the look and feel of the hearing aids and their ease of use."

Hayley says: "Results from all the stages of the evaluation were collated independently by the Department of Health and used to decide which products and suppliers would be awarded a place on the new contract."

More choice, more potential

Complete ranges of hearing aids are now available from the top five manufacturers in the

industry: Oticon, Siemens, Phonak, GN Resound and Starkey. The contract also offers speciality products and accessories to meet all needs.

NHS Supply Chain produces an online catalogue – available to all hospitals and clinics. Hayley says that staff and patients can be confident that the items available are up to date and represent value for money. She estimates that the NHS Trusts that use the new hearing aid contract will be able to save up to 13% on previous prices.

Hayley says: "These savings matter to service users as well as the NHS because – in this time of squeezed budgets – it should mean that more resources are available for delivering a good service.

"After all, whilst we have done our best to secure advanced, high-quality hearing aids that are also very acceptable to users, that is not the end of the story. In the end, hearing aids are only as good as the care with which they are programmed and fitted.

"And clever technology is worth having only if users are helped to make the most of it."

Five of the new, behind-the-ear hearing aids now available to you on the NHS