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HB 48 gets NM residents with hearing loss in the loop

By Steve Frazier, Hearing Loss Support Specialist

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Donald Rumsfeld famously said, "You don't know what you don't know." That's certainly true for many with hearing loss, their families and friends. They don't know about hearing loops and telecoils because they were never told about them by their hearing care provider. They don't know if their hearing aids have telecoils or what telecoils are for.

I know they don't know because I regularly have people ask me, "What's a telecoil?" and, when told, then ask, "Why wasn't I told about them?" My answer: "Ask your provider." I also know because 66 percent of respondents to a survey sent out to over 2,000 hearing-aid wearers indicated they were not told about telecoils when purchasing their first pair of hearing aids. A different survey found that 60 percent of the hearing care providers who responded admitted to not telling clients about telecoils.

Telecoils are small wire coils available in over 70 percent of current hearing aid models and all cochlear implant processors. They normally add nothing to the cost of hearing aids and act as receivers for silent, electromagnetic sound waves transmitted by a room hearing loop or by a miniature version called a neckloop. That signal carries sound from the assistive listening systems (ALS) now required by the Americans with Disabilities Act in all public places of assembly like concert halls, theatres, meeting rooms, legislative chambers – places using a public address system. Although not required to, places of worship have led the way in providing such assistive listening systems, enabling worshipers to hear the word.

Telecoils allow users to connect to an ALS signal without the fuss of removing and risking damage to or loss of their hearing aids to don earphones. Their hearing aids stay in place, customizing sound to match the boost in power needed at various frequencies from low to high. The result is clearer speech – something earphones cannot provide – while minimizing background noise for the user, further helping with speech clarity.

Telecoils double hearing aid functionality. Their inclusion and activation in hearing aids should rightfully be a choice made by the hearing aid buyer, not usurped by a hearing care provider and kept a secret from the client.

Here's something else I know – by privately connecting individuals with their phones and other equipment, Bluetooth® does wonderful things, but it cannot serve a room full of people. Loops and telecoils can. That's why six states – Arizona, Delaware, Florida, New York, Rhode Island and Utah – now have laws on the books requiring that buyers be made aware of telecoil technology prior to purchasing hearing aids. Similar legislation has been proposed in several other states, including New Mexico. Full disclosure – until recently, I sat on the N.M. Speech-Language Pathology, Audiology and Hearing Aid Dispensing Practices Board that could write such a rule, but has repeatedly declined to do so over the objection of the public members on the board.

More than 300,000 New Mexicans have some degree of hearing loss. There are many caring, conscientious audiologists and hearing aid dispensers here who provide them exemplary service. They willingly go the extra mile to ensure clients get all the benefits hearing aids can provide. They counsel them about how hearing aids can, with the mere touch of a telecoil button, wirelessly connect to assistive listening systems in their home TV room, at church, the movies and elsewhere. Unfortunately, some providers, conscientious otherwise, make the decision not to tell their clients about this technology.

Rep. Patricia Roybal Caballero, D-Albuquerque, has filed HB 48 on behalf of a nonprofit advocacy group, the Committee for Communication Access, that would mandate the counseling of clients purchasing hearing aids on ADA-compliant telecoil technology. This bill will allow buyers to make an informed decision as to whether or not the technology would be useful to them.

Now you know what you didn't know, at least about telecoils and hearing loops, and if you believe people should be told about this technology prior to spending thousands on hearing aids or tens of thousands on cochlear implants, go to www.nmlegis.gov/members/Find_My_Legislator, locate your state senator and representative, and ask both to vote for HB 48. Next, go to www.newmexicansformichelle.com/contact and ask our new governor to sign this bill. This way, our state leaders will also be in the know.