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Don’t Make Us Beg

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Some important news came out of the United States in early June which, for a refreshing change, had *nothing* to do with the political landscape. No, this news is the good stuff – the kind that makes the hard of hearing heart beat faster and our hopes climb higher.

On June 2nd, the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NAS) issued what is considered a ground-breaking report: *Hearing Health Care for Adults: Priorities for Improving Access and Affordability*. An expert committee was formed to assess the state hearing health care, its affordability and accessibility for adults in the United States. The resulting study includes 12 recommendations that, if implemented, would bring hearing loss out of the shadows as a major and *critical* health and social issue. It would make it easier for a person with hearing loss to find and use high-quality, affordable services, technologies, and supports.

The Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) strongly supported the recommendations in a statement: “They clearly emphasize that the individual with hearing loss – the consumer – should be the primary focus in the provision of hearing health care. The findings in the report touch on almost every aspect of hearing health care, underscoring the fact that managing hearing loss not only requires far more than the technology of hearing aids, but also involves family and society as a whole.”

The recommendations:

1. Improve population-based information on hearing loss and hearing health care
2. Develop and promote measures to assess and improve quality of hearing health care services
3. Remove the Food and Drug Administration’s Regulation for Medical Evaluation or Waiver
4. Empower consumers and patients in their use of hearing health care
5. Improve access to hearing health care for underserved and vulnerable populations
6. Promote hearing health care in wellness and medical visits for those with concerns about their hearing

7. Implement a new [FDA] device category for over-the-counter wearable hearing devices
8. Improve the compatibility and interoperability of hearing technologies with communications systems and the transparency of hearing aid programming
9. Improve affordability of hearing health care by actions across federal, state, and private sectors
10. Evaluate and implement innovative models of hearing health care to improve access, quality, and affordability
11. Improve publicly available information on hearing health
12. Promote individual, employer, private sector, and community-based actions to support and manage hearing health and effective communication

Bravo! As a consumer advocate with hearing loss, these recommendations cover just about everything I ever wanted, although my personal jury is still out on #7 (as it is stated above). I don't believe that everybody requires the full-on hearing device with a hefty price tag. While the OTC option is tantalizing, I also believe that anyone seeking hearing help should have some degree of professional evaluation. How do we balance this?

My other problem is that this is an American report and, although a member of HLAA, I'm *Canadian*. This report doesn't fully address the reality of hearing health care delivery in my province and my country. So, after gleefully jumping up and down for a couple of minutes, I thought, *"Who's reading this in Canada? And how are we going to get the same sort of pot-stirring report here? Who is going to start?"*

Somebody has to — because the 12 recommendations, in reality, are not new news. Both in the United States and in Canada, consumers and professionals have been saying the same thing for years. Just not *all* of us. Together. At the same time. With teeth and grit and high-octane support.

It's time. The market is shifting with the entry-level, low cost communication devices such as PSAPs. People with hearing loss want affordable options, and now that they can smell the change in the air, they will demand them. And it's clear, in the US at least, that the hearing health industry is not only sniffing the same air, but is trying to decide what to do about it.

Consumer advocates want to work with the hearing health industry to bring about change. Canadians with hearing loss are waiting. Please, don't make us beg.