

Getting in the Loop

By Rose Simpson



About the Author

Rose Simpson is an Ottawa writer and editor whose work focuses on consumer health and safety and medical professional development. She is the former editor of Audio Infos Canada and Canadian Psychiatry Aujourd'hui, and was a speechwriter for the federal and Ontario ministers of health.



Photo of a univox system which is a portable loop for a car or living room.

There was buzz going around the spring conference of the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association (CHHA) in 2014.

For the first time, many delegates to the conference, which was held at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto, could actually hear the speakers clearly without having to sit close and read lips. People were

getting emotional. A few people were actually crying.

Before each session, delegates were advised to turn on the little switches to activate the T-Coils that connected their hearing aids wirelessly to the microphones set up around each room.

Participants would say later, they felt that finally, they were in the loop. It was all part of a partnership between the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, Better Hearing Solutions of Ontario, Thorvin Electronics of Ontario, and Advanced Listening Systems of B.C. – companies that specialize in the distribution and installation of hearing loop systems.

By all accounts what happened next was miraculous.

“Suddenly the speaker’s voice went directly into their ears and they could hear what was being said,” recalled Robert Corbeil, the association’s national executive director. “It was just amazing.

You could see in the faces of many people – the ‘wow’ effect; it was great.”

Many of the delegates had heard of hearing loops before but few had used them. Hearing loops aren’t as popular here in Canada as they are in Europe where they have been in use for more than five decades.

Assistive devices are actually mandated by legislation in Great Britain and some other countries so hearing loops are in use in shopping malls, banks, schools, modes of transportation and entertainment venues.

Mostly, hearing loops in Canada are found in a smattering of churches and halls which have been fitted by enterprising volunteers. Some people use them in their living rooms to watch television. Rarely have they been used in businesses or public institutions.

The CHHA is hoping to change that. This year, it is developing a strategy to increase public awareness about the benefits of looping and other assistive devices to ensure that, once and for all, hearing is no longer considered the “invisible disability”.

Its efforts come on the heels of a growing, grassroots movement in the United States spearheaded by the Hearing Loss Association of America, which is calling for greater accessibility for people with hearing loss as well as key legislative action to give teeth to their efforts.

At the centre of this sea change stands Juliette Sterkens (AuD), an award-winning, Wisconsin-based audiologist who has the lonely business of travelling America on behalf of the HLA. Sterkens goes from community to community spreading the world,

engaging consumers, professionals and businesses. Her efforts are funded by grants from the Carol and David Myers Family Foundation.



Juliette Sterkens

Thanks to her influence, more than 400 hearing loops have been installed in her native Wisconsin alone.

Advocates like Sterkens have been encouraging Americans who suffer from hearing loss to speak up and demand looping services in their churches, businesses and other institutions. She is also sounding a rallying cry among hearing health care professionals to do better for their patients and offer them hearing solutions that go beyond in-ear devices.

“Hearing health care providers put too much faith in hearing aids and CIs,” Sterkens said in a recent interview. “They put too much faith in upgrading to more technologically “advanced” hearing aids. But even the best hearing aids cannot give a person with hearing loss normal hearing nor can hearing aids restore the user’s auditory processing issues, just like new running shoes don’t make you a marathon runner.

“Plus hearing aids cannot overcome poor acoustics, distance and background noise that occurs from all around. Yes, new directional microphones can make a difference if the noise is less than six feet away, but that’s only if the noise is behind the person and if the person’s auditory processing issues are not too involved.”

Sterkens, her colleagues and volunteers are getting the message out through the media, professional magazines, webinars and presentations at conferences. Her message is clear: hearing health care providers have an obligation to provide better solutions for their clients, ones that are more tailored to their needs and quality of life.

NEW FRONTIER IN CANADA

Robert Corbeil of the CHHA admits his organization and others including the Canadian Hearing Society have a battle on their hands. Until recently, there has been no public will to offer better hearing solutions, outside of hearing aids, to those with hearing loss. There has been no legislation, no outcry by consumers and little support from the hearing health care profession.

But that may be changing. In January, changes were made to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) which will now require businesses with more than 20 employees to better serve their clients who have disabilities. The government of B.C. is also committed to decreasing barriers and increasing accessibility for people with disabilities. Its document, Accessibility 2024, lays the roadmap for making B.C. the most progressive province in Canada for people with disabilities by 2024.

Legislation in Europe and the United States has given advocates a basis on which to hang their hopes, but it is still unclear whether stronger legislation will make a difference here in Canada.

For example, in its support material, mailed to businesses in advance of its legislative changes, the Ontario government only mentions assistive devices once and there is no suggestion

that businesses include signage that they are hearing friendly. Business owners are only encouraged to tell staff to speak clearly and face a person with hearing loss.

THE ROLE OF THE HEARING INDUSTRY

Juliette Sterkens believes that the hearing industry itself could do more to help North American Society embrace assistive technologies.

“The hearing industry is not really fully supporting this movement,” Sterkens says. “In fact, (manufacturers) recently announced that they are going to work to bring about a new digital wireless standard for hearing aids. The question is whether this will happen anytime soon.

“Some experts predict it will take five to ten years, some even suggest it may never happen.”

When the hearing industry makes this kind of announcement, she says, it could discourage audiologists or consumers from bringing looping into their communities. After all, if a new wireless standard will happen “soon,” why would anyone bother with the hardwire installation of loops?

Sterkens believes loops need to be installed immediately to help today’s hearing device users.

“When a new wireless standard does happen, be it five or ten years from now, we will work just as hard for places that have a loop installed to add a small wireless transmitter for the new hearing aids to work side by side with the loops for as long as people still have T-Coils.”

WALK THE TALK

The good news in Canada is that there are hearing and industry professionals willing to take up the cause, to make a difference, community by community.

Lynne McCurdy of Wellington Hearing Care in Guelph, Ontario, recently installed a looped system in her waiting rooms.



Lynne McCurdy

“I’ve been aware of looped rooms for many years but wished that there were more of them around. The technology is great but is under-utilized. It would be great if more buildings would offer them.”

She hopes that hearing professions will take more of an interest in the technology.

“I don’t think audiologists and HIPs are always well trained or even think about looped systems much since there are so many other wireless technologies that are so popular now but unfortunately most of them are not easily accessible to the masses at such a cheap cost to the consumer.”

Jerry Laufman of Lincoln Hearing in Beamsville, Ontario, agrees. He cites a number of roadblocks including a lack of qualified installers across Canada and a lack of public knowledge that the technology even exists.

“I’m a big fan of loop systems,” he says. “Anytime you can achieve a “direct

audio signal” to your ears, you will achieve the best in sound quality and speech understanding. This applies to normal hearing and hearing impaired individuals.



Jerry Laufman

“It is like using your personal headset of tuned headphones. Using a direct signal reduces variables like poor room acoustics, echoes, distance from speaker, speaker not facing you. Accents are easier to understand and loops significantly reduce background and interfering noises.”

They can also reduce the stigma associated with the wearing of hearing aids.

Doug Fisher, a volunteer at All Saints’ Anglican Church in Ottawa, polled parishioners before installing a second assistive system recently. He says most parishioners didn’t like the idea of wearing a necklace or headsets to listen to sermons and the choir. He said parishioners liked the fact that their devices were not obvious to others.

The fact that people who wear hearing aids feel self-conscious about them continues to be a problem. If people don’t speak up and demand the services, if they are unable or unwilling to, advocate for themselves, how will others know that our society can do better for people with hearing loss?

Some believe change may simply begin at the audiologist’s office, that hearing clinics need to begin to educate clients on the importance of the T-Coil.

Hugh Mitchell, past president of the Victoria chapter of the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, who wears a cochlear implant and uses his T-Coil every day, says many audiologists aren't aware of the importance of the T-Coil.

"I really want audiologists to become more aware of the usefulness of T-switches. In my experience, they really don't give much credit to a T-switch; and they don't encourage clients to have them put into their hearing aids. I've heard of an audiologist that told a person she didn't need it."

The looping industry also has a role to play. Currently, there are few companies, including Better Hearing Solutions in Ontario and Advanced Listening Systems in B.C., who are qualified to install hearing loops which require expert knowledge of the positioning of each microphone and the installation of wiring. Because Canada is such a large country, travel adds to the cost of installation, so what may be needed is a training and apprenticeship program here in Canada for individuals to qualify them to install loops at a reasonable price.

In the meantime, Bill Droogendyk, proprietor of Better Hearing Systems of Troy, Ontario has become a tireless advocate for hearing loop technology, lecturing to audiology/HIP students at Western University, Conestoga and George Brown colleges.



Bill Droogendyk

Droogendyk's journey began as a volunteer when he was asked to install a loop system at his church. Since then, and after training in three programs in the U.S., he has installed more than 40 systems: two in Alberta and the rest in Ontario. Most of the systems are in churches.

He has also installed a system in a lunch/boardroom at Unitron. The room seats about 100 people.

"We hold seminars and things for the public and for our customers who are audiologists and dispensers," says Sheila Douglas, AuD, an audiologist and technical support for Unitron. "So when they come here for meetings, it's nice they can hear what's going on."

Tim Archer, CEO of Advanced Listening Systems of Victoria, is another entrepreneur who isn't waiting for legislation to take effect in Canada. Following the testing of four mini loop systems as a pilot project at a Vancity Credit Union branches in Victoria and Vancouver, he installed similar systems in 57 branches of the Credit Union. It works similar to a looped room except the range is small, only within a metre or two of the teller where the loop is installed.



Tim Archer

"Vancity's installation has allowed not only better access for their clients, but also for their hard of hearing employees and has had very positive feedback from the hard of hearing community," says Archer who is also spearheading efforts

in British Columbia to get the province to better serve those with hearing loss.

WHAT HEARING PROFESSIONALS CAN DO

Juliette Sterkens has this advice for hearing professionals who want to help promote the technology and help educate patients and others in their community about hearing loops.

She recommends that AuDs/HHPs start by educating themselves, and:

- Install a hearing loop in their waiting and/or treatment rooms
- Demonstrate the loop to each and every client *as well as* their significant others
- Offer clients materials to bring the technology to the attention of their churches (that is where loops can quickly gain momentum). See <http://www.loopwisconsin.com/PDFFiles/Card3.pdf> and <http://www.hearingloop.org/00TechWorship.pdf>
- Donate funds towards loops or encourage their clients to make a difference
- Educate their community on the benefits of loop technology by public speaking and holding special "Hearing Loop Community Events"
- Reach out to AV engineers, refer them to articles in the professional audio magazines on looping and encourage them to attend training in the IEC Hearing Loop Standard
- Invite speakers to their professional conferences to present on hearing loop technology

"Yes this will take time – but most worthwhile things take time and are rarely easy," she says. "But to hear someone say they could hear every word at a wedding, a meeting or a play – makes this work very worthwhile."

FURTHER READING

1. http://www.hearingresearch.org/ross/hearing_aid_use/hearing_aid_services_and_satisfaction_the_consumer_viewpoint.php
2. <http://www.hearingreview.com/2014/09/consumer-perceptions-impact-inductively-looped-venues-utility-hearing-devices/>
3. http://bhscouncil.org/pdfs/M8_Hearing_aid_satisfaction_2010.pdf
4. https://www.phonakpro.com/content/dam/phonak/b2b/FM_eLibrary/Increasing_hearing_aid_adoption_through_multiple_environmental_listening_utility.pdf
5. <http://www.listeningandspokenlanguage.org/HearingLoops/>
6. <http://www.marriotttheatre.com/listening-device>
7. <http://hearinghealthmatters.org/hearingnewswatch/2014/hearing-industry-seeks-new-wireless-standard-hearing-aids-t-coil-advocates-say-fast/>
8. A “How to Guide” for Practitioners at www.loopwisconsin.com/PDFFiles/ADA-invigoratepracticeLR.pdf and “Telecoil Essentials” at www.loopwisconsin.com/PDFFiles/ADA-getinloopJS.pdf
9. “Roadmap to a Looped Community” article (with permission from American Academy of Audiology): www.loopwisconsin.com/PDFFiles/SterkensATMayJun.pdf
10. “Hearing Loops: The WOW Factor—Hearing Beyond 8 Feet”, an AudiologyOnline webinar at: www.audiologyonline.com/audiology-ceus/course/hearing-loops-wow-factor-beyond-24045
11. Tools and useful resources created by Academy of Audiology and Hearing Loss Association of America Get in the Loop Joint Task Force at: www.audiology.org/publications-resources/consumer-information/get-hearing-loop and <http://www.hearingloss.org/content/get-hearing-loop>
12. http://www.hearingloop.org/SoundCommunicationsArticle_2010.pdf

Canadian Hearing Report 2015;10(1):6-10.