

## BAA President Blog – 19<sup>th</sup> August 2024

You will see that BAA has just released a position statement, which sets out what we believe should happen regarding the NHS's provision of hearing aids.

Those who know me well know that I am a passionate defender of the NHS and very much opposed to anything that creates a system where those less able to afford healthcare cannot access what they need. As a shortsighted mum of two very shortsighted young men, I know the cost of having to pay for something without which none of us could function in society, and I have frequently had to juggle finances to do so.

As a board, we at BAA all agree on the core principle that audiology services must be free at the point of access for everyone who needs it. We do not want to see a move to voucher schemes for hearing aids and anything which risks ultimately privatising parts of the audiology pathway. That absolutely does not mean we are anti-private sector. We know many audiologists from the private sector that offer a brilliant, patient-centred service, and we recognise that many people with hearing loss will choose them for their hearing care for all sorts of reasons.

However, we and many of our members were increasingly concerned about blanket proposals to use the private sector to tackle waiting lists and specifically to provide hearing aids for “routine hearing loss”. Apart from the fact that it is not simple to define what is routine and what isn't, and the risk that this is a slippery slope to removing this provision from the NHS, we just don't believe that shifting this caseload to the private sector is the right thing to do universally.

I am desperately sad that patients are waiting years in some cases to be seen for a hearing aid and I know that not all NHS services are providing the best quality care. But we still believe the NHS is the best place to provide the high quality, holistic care patients need. NHS services have the trained staff, infrastructure, governance and joined up pathways to do this most safely and effectively. But what most NHS services don't have is the capacity to tackle their waiting lists and quality issues. However, the idea that moving adult hearing aid provision will free up capacity in the NHS is entirely flawed.

For starters, we know that there is a finite audiology workforce, and moving adult hearing care to the private sector will mean a huge increase in staff moving to the private sector, leaving insufficient staff capacity in the NHS. We know that NHS adult audiology services rely on the funding for more routine work to resource the complex work. We know that staff should be exposed to all types of cases for a holistic understanding of audiology and practice during their training and ongoing clinical practice.

So, BAA are asking that before the UK's governments decide that using the private sector is a quick fix for waiting lists, they consider appropriately funding existing NHS Audiology services to allow improved investment in infrastructure, staffing, training and education, to ensure long-term sustainability. Where there really isn't the capacity and appropriate service provision, we ask that the use of the private sector is planned carefully hand in hand with NHS services to ensure holistic care and continuity of pathways. After all, adults with hearing loss are lifelong patients - they cannot be fitted with hearing aids and then discharged.

It is important to add that we are also calling on NHS services and our own members to think about how they can deliver their services differently if necessary. It's been a challenging few years for UK Audiology, but

services need to adapt and work differently to tackle waiting lists and overcome the other issues they face, whilst still maintaining quality and good scientific practice.

So, we'd encourage you as BAA members to engage with your ICB leads, local MP/MSP/MS/MLAs and share our statement. Now is the time to make it clear that existing NHS services must be supported as the safest way to provide evidence-based hearing care across the lifespan, with the scientific leadership and integrated pathways that are needed.

*As ever, you can contact me or any of our board directors here: [admin@baaudiology.org](mailto:admin@baaudiology.org)*

*Take care*

*Sam*

*BAA President*