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**Board of Directors: Having the Hearing Loss Conversation** • December 24, 2015

## EDITOR'S PEN

Gary Barg, Editor-in-Chief

# Board of Directors: Having the Hearing Loss Conversation

I want to take a moment to talk about two studies of great importance to people with elderly loved ones. They were both conducted at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore Medicine. First, in a 2011 study focusing on dementia, Frank Lin, an otologist and epidemiologist and his colleagues monitored the cognitive health of 639 people who were mentally sharp when the study began. The researchers tested the volunteers' mental abilities regularly, following most for about 12 years, and some for as long as 18 years. The results were striking: The worse the initial hearing loss was, the more likely the person was to develop dementia. Compared with people of normal hearing, those with moderate hearing loss had triple the risk.

The second study was conducted by Kevin Contrera, MPH, and MD candidate, along with his colleagues. In their study, adults 70 years of age or older who had received a hearing test were placed into one of three hearing impaired categories: no hearing loss, mild hearing loss, and moderate to more severe. Their results suggested that moderate or more severe hearing loss was associated with a *39% increased risk* of mortality, while a mild hearing loss had a *21% increased risk* of mortality, compared to those with normal hearing.

What all this means to you is that hearing loss can no longer be the topic that

your loved one stops in its tracks before the conversation begins. If you are concerned about their hearing at all, you and your family members must find a way to get them to an audiologist, as soon as possible.

In fact, talking with your family members from out of town about your loved ones hearing loss during the holiday season is quite fitting. I consider hearing problems to be a gateway to getting your long distance family members to understand what challenges we face as local caregivers. They don't know mom can't drive or dad wanders – but they sure know that Uncle Bill can't hear when they try and talk with him on the phone.

The first thing your loved one needs to know is that there is no stigma attached to hearing loss and the technology has come a long way since their own parent were dealing with the issue. From new smaller hearing aids to **captioning telephones**, there are some tremendous technologies to help with the issue.

### **A few tips:**

Let them know that you are having this conversation out of love rather than frustration. Stay calm, yet insistent. Don't let them change the subject.

Whether the conversation is conducted in a group or by a sibling that you feel would best carry the message, don't gang up on them.

Be ready with solutions from having already chosen an audiologist and/or a captioned telephone partner.

Go with them and have your hearing checked as well. It should help avoid the feeling of being picked on or singled out and make them feel more comfortable.

Besides, you may be surprised at what the audiologist tells you about your own hearing.

Now more than ever, it is imperative that hearing challenges must be faced head-on, and not just because you have been getting hoarse from screaming about the television volume.

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