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**Caregiver Thought Leader Interview with Dr. Sheena Oliver** • July 6, 2016

## EDITOR'S PEN

Gary Barg, Editor-in-Chief

### **Caregiver Thought Leader Interview: Dr. Sheena Oliver, AuD, MBA**

**Vice President of Oticon**

**Gary Barg:** Dr. Oliver, There are some studies from major institutions showing, in particular, a direct link between hearing loss and dementia. Can you talk to me about that a little bit?

**Dr. Sheena Oliver:** Absolutely. A lot of people do not realize that hearing loss is really a major public health issue, because it not only affects physical health, but cognition, perception about one's mental acuity, social skills, family relationships and self-esteem. There is a lot of research now out of leading institutions that talk about the effects of untreated hearing loss on cognition, and what we are finding is for individuals that have hearing loss, they typically will withdraw from social situations and gatherings, because it becomes a very difficult task for them to be able to engage socially and carry on a conversation because they are struggling to hear and actively participate.

Also, a lot of individuals, have those embarrassing moments where they misunderstand something said to them and as a result, they start to withdraw, and that withdrawal from those social interactions can lead to depression, as well as a diminished quality of life. That is where we see the link to cognitive decline. Because, as humans, we need to be actively engaged socially and engaging in conversations in order for us to stay mentally fit. In the absence of that, we start to see the cognitive decline. So, there is really some serious consequences of not treating hearing

loss.

**Gary Barg:** Talk to me about BrainHearing® Technology. What is that?

**Dr. Sheena Oliver:** At **Oticon**, brain hearing technology is the foundation or the approach that we take to developing hearing instrument technology. For us it is about delivering the technology to the brain. A lot of people think we hear with our ears but we really do not, we hear with our brain. The ear is just the transducer to getting that information up to the brain. It is about delivering the information with the most complete signal possible. We do not want to manipulate the sound at all. We want to make sure the brain can get it in its most natural state and do what it was intended to do. All of our technologies and devices, specifically with OPN, are designed to deliver that signal in the most clear, most natural way.

**Gary Barg:** And I am glad you mentioned OPN, because I have been reading a lot about that. These are certainly not your grandfather's hearing aids.

**Dr. Sheena Oliver:** You are absolutely right. It is a breakthrough for a number of reasons. We had to take a different approach in how we think about hearing aid development. The two main types of technologies that we see in most hearing aids today is the use of directionality and noise reduction. Unfortunately, those technologies have not done a good job in helping people with hearing loss perform in the most difficult listening situations, specifically where there are multiple speakers talking. You can picture sitting at a dinner table at a restaurant where there are multiple conversations going on and someone with a hearing loss generally will have to identify that one person they really want to focus on, and unfortunately cannot engage or have conversations with others at the table.

In order for us to be able to address that, we had to totally start from the ground up and reconceptualize how technology should be developed. With OPN, we are now able to do that. We are addressing that core challenge of being able to engage when there are multiple sound sources, whether they are competing speakers or other sounds that are happening. The benefit for the user of the device is now they not only hear better, but they do not have to work as hard to hear better and they can also remember more of what is being said.

**Gary Barg:** And I think this is really important because for someone with hearing challenges, it becomes a downward spiral. First they don't feel like going out because they can't hear anything. Then they become more and more isolated. Later they are not able to talk to their loved ones on the phone or go to public events.

**Dr. Sheena Oliver:** Absolutely. It is interesting that you talked about not being able to engage with loved ones. One of the challenges we heard about from a new user of OPN was that she lived in a different state than her adult children and grandkids. They would typically have conversations using Skype. Well, you can imagine the grandkid with the attention span of a 5-year-old, became very frustrated because grandma was always saying, “huh?” or “Could you repeat that? I didn’t quite catch that.” She could recognize that her grandchildren were becoming frustrated, so she kept the conversations very short. Now, with OPN she can actually have quality conversations with her grandkids which she was just never able to do before.

You are right. The idea of just being totally removed from social environments, it is a death spiral because it leads to that withdrawal, that social isolation and for many depression. That is absolutely what we want to avoid.

**Gary Barg:** What have you heard from family caregivers?

**Dr. Sheena Oliver:** For caregivers it is all about peace of mind, especially those who are concerned about their loved ones who live remotely. OPN is the first internet connected hearing instrument, so it is able to connect to a world of devices. You will see products like LG appliances and BMW as part of this network. You may even be familiar with the Nest Thermostat, where you can control your thermostat remotely from home. Say your adult mother lives in another state and you are concerned about her safety. Now you could set up a rule on the IFTTT platform to say when my mother’s hearing aid batteries get low, send me a text message. Then you can send someone over to change the battery or call to say it is time to change your battery. It gives these users the independence that they are looking for.

**Gary Barg:** Peace of mind is really the core for what every caregiver is looking for, to know that their loved ones are safe are not isolated and are hearing as well as they can.

**Dr. Sheena Oliver:** One other interesting example. An attorney who was recently fit with OPN said that he was not only able to just hear what the judge was saying, but he could also finally understand the judge’s mood and tone. To be able to understand mood and tone is a deeper level of communication and people with hearing loss do not tend to have that ability because so much of their effort is focused on just understanding what is being said. That is something that we have never really been able to see before with a hearing device.

**Gary Barg:** What are some of the challenge caregivers have of getting their loved ones to an audiologist. What do you tell a caregiver who says, “I want my

loved one to see you, but I cannot broach the subject.” What works?

**Dr. Sheena Oliver:** I had the same issue with my father. I knew he was suffering from hearing loss but he just completely ignored me and I’m an audiologist. I had to tell him what the impact was on his grandkids. That the kids were upset because he was not able to hear their stories as they were talking about their days and their friends, so I really appealed to the emotional side of it. That is one approach and I think a lot of people are receptive to that. If you have loved ones who are living in other areas than where the primary caregiver is, I think the conversation is about independence. We want to make sure that if a smoke detector goes off in the middle of the night that they are able to hear it. You need to try to find what is going to resonate the strongest.

**Gary Barg:** How do I find out more about the OPN?

**Dr. Sheena Oliver:** If you are already wearing hearing devices, you can reach out to your local hearing care professional and ask about OPN. If not, you can go onto [Oticon.com](http://Oticon.com), type in your zip code and a find a list of hearing care professionals in your local area.

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