BHI director reports on newly launched program to stimulate physician referrals

By David H. Kirkwood

John Olive, the new executive director of the Better Hearing Institute (BHI), presented a detailed report on February 22 during the Hearing Industries Association (HIA) annual meeting in Phoenix on a newly launched pilot program designed to increase hearing aid sales by establishing referral relationships between primary-care physicians (PCPs) and hearing healthcare professionals.

In an upbeat presentation, Olive explained BHI’s focus on physicians: “If there is one place where we can reach the people we need to reach and to motivate them, it is through their primary-care physicians. The internist, the family practitioner, the general practitioner—these are the key people we need to reach.”

The Physician Referral Development Program (PRDP) is the centerpiece of the strategic program for BHI that Olive has drawn up since taking over as director in June 2000. Established in 1973, BHI is an independent, non-profit organization devoted to raising public awareness of hearing and hearing care. Early last year, after a period in which the institute had grown largely inactive and faced an uncertain future, Reg Garratt, chairman of Knowles Electronics, was elected president. In February 2000, HIA voted to substantially increase funding for the institute. This paved the way for a revival of the organization and the launching of the physician-referral program, which will cost approximately $1 million in its first year.

PILOT PROGRAM UNDER WAY

After several months of planning and preparation and the hiring of a Washington, DC-based public affairs firm, APCO Worldwide, the PRDP was launched last December in Orlando, FL. As of the HIA meeting, the program was also under way in two other test markets—Austin, TX, and Phoenix—and was scheduled to begin in Atlanta and Minneapolis-St. Paul by the end of April.

Olive said that BHI seeks to accomplish several objectives during the pilot phase of the program: (1) determining if the approach—seeking physician referrals—is viable, (2) developing effective ways to reach PCPs, (3) creating appropriate materials for the program, and (4) stimulating and sustaining dispenser enthusiasm.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

In each test market, the program consists of several parts, which together, said Olive, represent “a comprehensive effort to impact a whole community.” The target audiences are hearing professionals, PCPs, consumers, and the media.
Olive noted that in the various test markets additional dispensers have joined the effort after the organizational meeting. For example, in Phoenix where 35 practitioners attended the session on January 25, more than 50 dispensers are participating.

**Physician meetings**

BHI then invites physicians in each market to dinner meetings featuring a keynote address by a prominent physician specialist. At the meetings, which are also attended by the participating hearing professionals, the referral program is explained and essential information about hearing loss and hearing care is presented. This includes summaries of the National Council on the Aging study on the consequences of untreated hearing loss and of the VA/NIDCD report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* on the effectiveness of hearing aids, as well as information on technologic advances in hearing aids and on the professional capabilities of the hearing professionals involved in the program.

The PCPs also receive a package of materials, including posters for their office urging patients to talk to their doctor about hearing loss, FAQ (frequently asked questions) cards, “What To Expect” forms spelling out the commitment made by hearing professionals in the BHI referral program, and a supply of patient-referral forms.

Olive concludes the program with a direct request to physicians to make referrals to hearing professionals.

Thus far, PCPs have responded well to the program. Forty-five attended the first meetings in Orlando, and larger turnouts are expected in Austin and Phoenix. Olive was especially encouraged when the Orlando Medical Society asked BHI to provide a speaker for the first in a series of quarterly meetings. Now, BHI routinely asks for support from the local medical society and generally gets a favorable response, because, said Olive, “we have a strong message to deliver.”

**Outreach**

In each test market, local media are contacted and encouraged to do stories on hearing loss and hearing care. In Orlando, that led to two radio interviews with Olive, one of which was sent to more than 50 member stations in the Florida Radio Network. In addition, two Orlando television stations plan to provide coverage in conjunction with the Medical Society meeting in April.

Along with generating media coverage, the program seeks to reach consumers by contacting local AARP chapters and senior organizations and by placing posters in high-traffic locations.

**Follow-up**

Olive emphasized that the program “is not a one-time shot,” and that the follow-up will be a major component of the program. To that end, BHI sends weekly faxes to participating dispensers updating them on the PRDP.

However, he added, the ultimate success of the program will depend on the ability of participating dispensers to meet the expectations of the physicians who refer patients to them. Hearing professionals will need to...
maintain contact with the PCPs and their staff and encourage referrals. In addition, they must acknowledge referrals and report back to the PCP using the patient-evaluation form developed for the program.

MEASUREMENT
In addressing HIA, Olive noted repeatedly that a vital part of the physician-referral program is measuring its results. Participating dispensers will report to BHI on the number of patients referred by PCPs, the number of hearing aid evaluations performed on those patients, and the number of hearing aids sold.

At the time of the HIA meeting, it was still too soon to begin evaluating the results of the pilot program. However, the BHI director said, results in each test market will start being measured and reported 90 days after the initial dispenser meeting.

In the meantime, the BHI physician-referral program is moving full speed ahead. Olive said that 11 more target markets for 2001 will be selected by the end of March, and he urged hearing professionals to get involved when the program comes to their community.

The view from Europe
Anne-Marie Wolters, executive secretary of EHIMA, noted that her group and HIA have many common interests.

Wolters also reported that EHIMA commissioned a study, similar to the HIA-funded survey by the National Council on the Aging, measuring the effects of hearing loss on quality of life. To publicize the results, which make a strong case for the value of hearing aids, EHIMA initiated the creation of Hear-it AISBL, a non-profit organization that has established several separate web sites with different target groups.

Wolters then introduced Kim Ruberg, secretary general of Hear-it, who gave a detailed presentation on the sites, whose overall goal is to increase knowledge of hearing loss and the benefits of hearing care.

Insights on FDA
Larry Spears, acting director of the Food and Drug Administration's office of compliance for medical devices, discussed the work of his office, whose responsibilities include enforcing federal laws and regulations regarding hearing aids. Spears said that as Class I medical devices, hearing aids may be subject to less scrutiny than Class 2 or 3 devices, which carry greater risk. On the other hand, he said, since hearing aids are "restricted devices," the only Class 1 devices so categorized, FDA pays extra attention to "labeling" of hearing aids, a term that includes all advertising and other marketing, including web sites.

Professional leaders speak
In a new feature this year, HIA heard from the leaders of the four largest organizations of non-medical hearing professionals: Robert Manning, AuD, president of the Academy of Dispensing Audiologists; David Fabry, PhD, president of the American Academy of Audiology; Vic Gladstone, PhD, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's chief staff officer for audiology; and Scott Austin, BC-HIS, president of the International Hearing Society.

E-COMMERCE REPORT
In other business at the annual meeting, Michael Jones, the HIA chairman, discussed the association's e-commerce initiative, which is designed to cut paperwork, reduce errors, and streamline communications between manufacturers and their customers. Jones said, “We hope to increase productivity throughout the supply chain.”

David Woodbury, HIA’s director of government relations, described efforts
being undertaken to reduce overall transaction costs in the industry through e-commerce. He also announced that the Virtual Trade Show, which offers information on member companies and links to their home pages, would be up and running by March 1 on the HIA web site, www.hearing.org.

DIRECTORS ELECTED
In Phoenix, HIA members elected several directors: Ian McWalter of Gennum Corporation; Mikael Worning of Oticon, Inc.; James Mulford of Phonic Ear, Inc.; Paul Erickson of Siemens Hearing Instruments, Inc.; Andrew Raguskus of Sonic Innovations, Inc.; Eric Spar of Widex; and Peter Van Nest of Bernafon, Inc. They joined the continuing members of the board of directors: Michael Jones of Phonak, Inc.; Carsten Trads of GN ReSound Corporation; John Zei of Knowles Electronics, Inc.; Gary Ullman of Unitron Industries, Ltd.; Glenn Hemmerle of Miracle-Ear; and Randall Raymond of Rayovac Corporation.