

An aerial photograph of the University of Michigan campus, showing various buildings, green spaces, and a prominent tower. The text is overlaid on the center of the image.

The Benefits of Using Audiology Assistants in a Cochlear Implant Program

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Disclosures

- Advisory Board Member: Cochlear Americas, Envoy Medical
- Consultant: MEMStim
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INTRODUCTION

- Demands are increasing for clinicians to be financially productive. Greater emphasis is being placed on
 - Audiology productivity and provision of billable services
 - Patient access
 - Patient satisfaction
 - Quality of care
- The University of Michigan Cochlear Implant program initiated a Cochlear Implant Audiology Assistant position in 2016. In this presentation we will review the benefits of such a position.

Many programs are looking for ways to improve the bottom line

- Dispense/sell hearing aids for CI patients' contralateral ears
- Increase the number of patients seen in an average day
 - Decrease the average amount of time spent with patients
 - Decrease the amount of time allotted for non-billable procedures
 - Offload the non-billable or non-expertise components of the audiologist's day, which facilitates both of the above

Medicare Fee Schedule Common CI CPTs

- CPT 92604 – Subsequent programming >7 years
 - Non-facility \$92.52, Facility \$69.84
- CPT 92626 – Evaluation of Auditory Rehabilitation Status, 1st hour
 - Non-facility \$91.80, Facility \$77.76

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- If an audiologist costs ~ \$50/hour, this does not leave that much room for profit

Test Assist for young pediatric patients

- In our program, we typically utilize 2 professionals when testing or programming patients less than 4 years of age
 - Improves reliability of test responses
 - Improves efficiency of audiometric testing and sound processor programming
 - Expedites pre-operative testing
 - Enhances patient care
 - Minimizes number of appointments needed for assessment or mapping

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- If an audiologist costs ~ \$50/hour X 2 = \$100/hour, this leaves no room for profit

We all spend time providing non-billable services

- CI Smart (2009) initiative determined that clinicians spent ~ 44% of their time performing other non-billable services (ONB)
- Dunn (2018) reported that audiologists continue to spend ~1/3 of their time providing ONB
- Counseling, troubleshooting, scheduling, responding to emails and phone calls are NOT billable services
- All of these are ESSENTIAL components of a CI Program
- Our bottom line can improve if we offload some of these services to an audiology assistant

Audiology Assistants make \$ense

- According to ZipRecruiter.com, audiology assistants typically make about \$34,305 annually (range = \$20-60K)
 - Plus benefits at 31.7% = **\$45,179 annual, \$21.72/hour**
- Average annual salary for audiologists = \$75,000
(<https://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/2016-Audiology-Survey-Annual-Salaries.pdf>)
 - Plus benefits (31.7%) = **\$98,775 annual, \$47.48/hour**
- In an “average” scenario, audiologists cost about \$25/hour more than a typical audiology assistant

Potential Job Responsibilities of a CI Audiology Assistant

- Management of processor upgrade requests, completion of order forms
- Insurance preauthorization for hearing aids and processor upgrades
- Daily Maintenance of
 - Test equipment/calibration
 - Loaner HAs/SPs
 - Test Forms and materials
 - Toy cleaning
- Programming and Hearing test assistance for young children, difficult to test
- Hearing aid and sound processor troubleshooting and assistance for telephone requests or “walk-ins”



What's the Value of reducing ONB?

Reducing Other Non-Billable Activities

31% of 1 FTE = 12.4 hrs/wk



University of Michigan Statistics

- From July 1, 2017 – July 1, 2019, our CI technician served as a test assistant for 662 appointments, opening the schedule for 662 additional one hour appointments.
- $662 \times \$69.84 = \sim \$46,340$ in additional billing
 - CPT 92604 – Subsequent programming >7 years
 - Non-facility \$92.52, Facility \$69.84
- Salary savings of $\$25/\text{hour} \times 662 = \$16,550.00$
- Improvements in audiology productivity (less time spent on ONB)
- Improved access for new patients

- Develop a Return on Investment proposal that outlines
 - **Savings** possible with the addition of an audiology assistant
 - Track ONB in your clinic and include this in your report
 - **Indicate** that such a position will facilitate: **-improvements in patient access, patient satisfaction, employee engagement, and quality of care**



ASHA and AAA Guidelines

- ASHA (Audiology assistant certification program coming in 2020)
- <https://www.asha.org/Practice-Portal/Professional-Issues/Audiology-Assistants/>
- AAA
- <https://www.audiology.org/publications-resources/document-library/audiologists-assistant>

Training programs for Audiology Assistants

What Programs Are Available?

Depending on your state's regulations, you can pursue educational programs at multiple levels. Training and certificate program opportunities in areas like audiology assistance or speech-language pathology may take as little as six months to complete. Associate and bachelor's degree programs are also available in subjects like communication sciences and disorders, audiology and speech-language pathology.

Some schools that offer degree and non-degree programs in audiology or speech pathology assistant include:

- Metropolitan State University of Denver
- University of Northern Colorado
- Mitchell Community College
- Kent State University
- Cerritos College
- Fayetteville Technical Community College

Online training programs

- Online:
<https://hearinghealthmatters.org/hearingnewswatch/2017/new-audiology-assistant-training-program-online-0223/>
- Nova Southeastern:
https://healthsciences.nova.edu/audiology/aud_assistant/index.html
- Audiology Academy sponsored by ADA
- <https://www.audiologyacademy.com/>
 - Prices for training and content: \$595/user - \$1,500/clinic
- In our experience, on-site training of an existing administrative staff has been beneficial

Summary

- In our experience, the addition of an audiology assistant has resulted in numerous improvements in our program:
 - Enhanced availability for troubleshooting
 - Improved patient satisfaction
 - Improvements in employee engagement
 - Improvement in clinic efficiency and quality of care
 - Test forms, equipment maintenance
 - Improvements in clinic appearance
 - Enhanced productivity

Thank you

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