

Hearing Instrument Dispensing Specialists



Occupational Brief Title Codes:

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Work Classification Based Related D.O.T. Occupations:

- Dental and Medical Equipment and Supplies Sales Representatives
- Orthopedic Shoes Salespersons
- Surgical Appliances Salespersons
- Veterinarian Supplies Sales Representatives

Interests Based Related

G.O.E. Occupations:

- Burial Needs Salespersons
- Musical Instruments and Accessories Salespersons
- Jewelry Salespersons
- Stereo Equipment Salespersons

Skills Based Related

O*NET Occupations:

- Counter and Rental Clerks
- Sales Representatives, Agricultural
- Sales Representatives, Instruments
- Sales Representatives, Medical

Noteworthy Quote:

“Working as a Hearing Instrument Dispensing Specialist allows you to help people with hearing impairment and their families enjoy an improved quality of life. It combines a healthcare profession that is truly dynamic and interesting with a rewarding career with excellent compensation.”

– Kathy Harvey, BC-HIS, CCCA, Hearing Instrument Dispensing Specialist, Virginia Beach, Virginia

Hearing instrument dispensing specialists (‘hear-ing ‘in-stru-ment di-‘spen-sing ‘spe-cia-lists) fit and sell hearing amplification systems (hearing aids) to individuals in retail establishments.

A hearing instrument is an electronic device that amplifies (increases) sound for people with impaired hearing. They have the same basic components of any public address system, except all the components are miniature and the amplified sound is delivered only to the ear of the user. The device consists of a microphone, a battery power supply, an amplifier and other modifying and adjusting circuits, and a receiver (speaker). The microphone receives sound waves and converts them to electrical or digital impulses. These impulses are amplified or adjusted with the aid of the power supply and other circuits. Once amplified, the receiver then converts the electric or digital impulses back into sound vibrations.

The components of a hearing aid are enclosed either in a case or shell, which is worn behind or within the ear. A small tube directs the amplified sound from the receiver into the ear canal of the wearer. A unit of this sort can fit into the ear canal with only a small protruding part. Individuals with a profound hearing impairment require a more powerful amplifier. These may be housed in a small sized case which can easily be carried in a shirt pocket. A cord connects the amplifier to the receiver in the ear.

It is important to understand that hearing instruments do not “cure” or change a person’s “hearing loss.” Hearing instruments change sounds. There are many different models of hearing instruments, and they work in different ways to change the sounds a user hears. Some hearing aids modify unwanted background noises.

Others amplify only specific frequencies, or mask noises generated in the ear itself.



Hearing aid specialists use instruments to test the hearing of clients.

Photo by International Hearing Society

Work Performed

Hearing instrument dispensing specialists, or **hearing aid specialists**, use test instruments and standard evaluation procedures to test the auditory system (hearing) of clients. They interpret and evaluate test results, and work with clients to demonstrate, select, fit, adapt, and modify hearing instrument systems.

After greeting a client, hearing instrument dispensing specialists conduct a brief discussion or compile a case history to learn the concerns of the client. They ask

questions on hearing problems such as pain, dizziness, ringing or buzzing in the ears, or a popping noise when yawning or swallowing. Further questions may center on difficulty in understanding all the words in a conversation, trouble hearing on the telephone, exposure to loud noise, and perception of “better ear” versus “worse ear.” Hearing instrument dispensing specialists inquire about the client’s use of medications and surgery, and a family history of hearing impairment. They will record observations about the client’s general appearance, ability to speech-read, or use of a hearing instrument.

Hearing instrument dispensing specialists then examine the ears. For this, they may use either a hand-held otoscope or a video-otoscope to examine the outer ear, ear canal, and tympanic membrane (eardrum). The examination reveals any abnormalities that might complicate the hearing evaluation or the fitting of a hearing instrument. The examination also helps dispensing specialists identify any disease or condition requiring medical referral or follow-up. If they observe any of eight designated symptoms, dispensing specialists advise clients to confer with a physician.

After examining the ears, hearing instrument dispensing specialists assess the client’s hearing. For this purpose, they use an audiometer calibrated according to standards set by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). Seated in a sound-treated room, the client wears earphones or insert phones. The ear being tested is stimulated by a series of tones, from very low to very high frequencies. The client signals when he or she hears a tone, and the level of the tones heard are recorded.

Different tests determine the hearing threshold (the lowest intensity of sound at which an individual can perceive an auditory stimulus). Pure tone audiometry assesses the person’s ability to hear frequencies, usually ranging from 125 to 8000 Hz (hertz). Speech audiometry tests the ability to repeat selected words from a live voice or a recording. Other tests determine the extent of loudness comfortably tolerated (comfortable loudness level), the maximum loudness tolerated (uncomfortable loudness level), and the desired frequency response and frequency range of a hearing instrument.

Hearing loss, when present, is described in terms of degree of loss and slope, and type of loss. Loss may range from within normal limits to mild, moderate, severe, or profound. The slope of loss may be flat, gradually sloping, steeply sloping, or precipitously sloping (a dramatic or abrupt drop). The type of loss may be conductive (caused by a malfunction of the outer or middle ear), sensori-neural (caused by damage to hair cells, nerve fibers, or both), or mixed (both conductive and sensori-neural). Also, tinnitus (head noises) may or may not be present.

After completing the tests, hearing instrument dispensing specialists identify and evaluate the client’s hearing problems, if any. They explain the findings to the client and discuss the need for hearing instruments. In this discussion, choice of hearing instruments often depends on the perceptions or misperceptions of the individual client. Specialist and client together consider factors such as experience with hearing instruments (if any), whether the client has a negative view of

assistive devices, what the client thinks the device will do (or not do), and other questions. At the same time, in meeting the needs of clients, hearing instrument dispensing specialists are bound by a Code of Ethics to offer the device best suited to each client’s hearing impairment, environment, lifestyle, or other concerns or limitations.

When the client decides to be fitted with hearing instruments, hearing instrument dispensing specialists take an impression of the part of the ear into which the hearing instrument will fit. They order the hearing instruments, and when they arrive, check for performance and fit.

Service to the client does not end here, however. The client must learn not only to use the instrument, but also to hear again. He or she must reestablish a memory for sounds, tolerance levels, and instant recognition of speech sounds. This process often requires extensive aural rehabilitative counseling from the hearing instrument dispensing specialist.

Hearing instrument dispensing specialists keep in close communication with their clients. In follow-ups, they help clients adapt to the hearing instruments and to understand the limitations. They instruct clients in the care and use of the hearing instruments. They may make adjustments to the devices and supply supplemental materials. They offer routine repairs and continuing service for the life of the hearing instruments.

If they are business proprietors, hearing instrument dispensing specialists also have additional duties. They maintain and pay for the upkeep on their place of business. They keep records of clients, inventory, expenses, payments, and other transactions.

Working Conditions

About 90 percent of hearing instrument dispensing specialists conduct their practice in modern office settings in medical-dental buildings or malls. Many offer hearing aid services in independent or manufacturer service center locations. Others work in the offices of physicians who specialize in diseases of the ear (otologists or otolaryngologists), or in a practice with an audiologist (hearing specialist). Hearing instrument dispensing specialists may also make house calls for those unable to travel.

Although the work is not physically taxing, hearing instrument dispensing specialists face mental and emotional challenges. Demanding clients with a misunderstanding of what hearing instruments can and cannot do can cause occasional stress.

Hours and Earnings

According to the International Hearing Society, most of its members work slightly more than 50 hours a week. These individuals are generally owners, partners, or officers in a hearing instrument practice. Employees or associates are more likely to work a standard forty hours a week.

Earnings vary with the education, training, and experience of the hearing aid specialist, employer, and geographic location. Earnings also vary with compensation method. Hearing instrument dispensing specialists may receive hourly

wages, commissions (a percentage of the sales they make), or a combination of wages and commissions. According to a small sampling conducted by *The Hearing Review 2004 Dispenser Survey*, in 2003, the average annual salary for hearing instrument dispensing specialists was \$54,308. Those who owned the practice (or business) earned an average of \$100,931 a year.

Benefits may be limited in smaller stores. Larger establishments may offer benefits such as paid holidays and vacation and sick time, health insurance, and retirement savings plans. Self-employed hearing instrument dispensing specialists must provide for their own benefits.

Education and Training

Each state has established standards for these professionals. The current minimum requirement in many states is a high school diploma or its equivalent, a sponsored training period, and passing an examination. However, the standards for entry are in a constant state of change owing to the ever advancing technology of the field. Some states are moving toward a minimum of two years of college study and training. Others are moving to a combination of formal academic training followed by an internship of supervised practice for one to two years.

The International Hearing Society offers educational resources through the International Institute for Hearing Instruments Studies (IIHIS). It accredits educational programs in the hearing instrument sciences, including distance learning, manufacturer-sponsored programs, and affiliated chapter meetings, conventions, and expositions. IIHIS is the leading publisher of industry-related textbooks and materials, awards certification of continuing education credits, and provides the written licensing examination for 32 states. It also sponsors the American Conference of Audioprosthology (ACA), a formal academic program of advanced study for experienced hearing instrument dispensing professionals. Successful completion of the course may award up to fifteen credit hours of upper baccalaureate coursework accredited by the American Council on Education.

Studies considered helpful for this work include audiology, health sciences, physics, acoustics, psychology, electronics, physiology and human anatomy, and business. Coursework should cover propagation, physical characteristics, measurement, and audiometric notation of sound; anatomy of the ear, physiology and theories of hearing, and causes and treatments of hearing impairments; audiometric assessment, instruments, and testing procedures; and classifications and patterns of hearing losses. Students should also receive training in basic hearing instrument technology, systems, electronics, modifications, and repairs; impression-taking techniques and fabrication; instrument fitting techniques; how to gather patient information and select the appropriate system; follow-up care; and management.

Hearing instrument dispensing specialists must also know and comply with the laws governing the hearing instrument profession issued by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), and state

regulatory boards. The FDA, for instance, requires, prior to the purchase of a hearing aid, that: 1. clients have obtained a medical evaluation of hearing loss within the last 6 months, or they must sign a waiver; 2. practitioners advise clients that seeing a physician about their hearing loss is in their best interest; and 3. practitioners provide a user instruction brochure and list of sources for repair and maintenance.

Licensing, Certification, and Professional Societies

All states have laws regulating the sale of hearing aids. Most require hearing instrument dispensing specialists to be licensed or registered. Although requirements in individual states vary, all specify minimal education and training, and the passing of a comprehensive examination that includes both written and practical testing. Minimum age requirements range from 18 to 21. Most states with licensing and registration requirements also require continuing education as a condition of renewal.

Independent certification of hearing instrument dispensing specialists is available from the National Board for Certification in Hearing Instrument Sciences (NBC-HIS). Candidates who meet specified criteria, demonstrate and maintain professional competence, and observe the goals of NBC-HIS earn the title Board Certified in Hearing Instrument Sciences (BC-HIS). Requirements include a minimum of two years experience, current state licensure or registration (where applicable), and successful completion of the National Competency Examination (NCE). To maintain certification, hearing health professionals must recertify every three years by accumulating 24 hours of approved continuing education units, or successfully retaking all sections of the NCE.

The International Hearing Society (IHS) also confers the title Hearing Instrument Specialist to members who pass state examinations and meet appropriate training requirements. IHS is a professional organization with about 3,000 members. It is dedicated to advancements in hearing instrument technology, increased knowledge of the hearing process, recognition of the needs of persons with impaired hearing, and expansion of the skills and professional competence of its members. It represents the interests of the profession before the media, consumers, and legislative and regulatory bodies, and offers training tools, technical resources, marketing materials, and other educational and networking opportunities.

Personal Qualifications

As suppliers of a personal service, hearing instrument dispensing specialists must be able to empathize with individuals from the very young to the elderly who have hearing problems. They should be perceptive and tactful. They must have patience to deal with all kinds of personalities. The work requires intense concentration and attention to detail. Hearing instrument dispensing specialists must have high ethical standards, and a willingness to do everything possible to satisfy their clients.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state

department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed

There are about 8,000 hearing instrument dispensing specialists employed throughout the United States. About 92 percent of them own and operate their own practice. Others are employees of independent business owners, audiologists, otologists, and otolaryngologists. Most hearing instrument dispensing specialists work in more populated areas, including mid- to large size towns and cities.

Employment Outlook

In general, approximately 10 percent of the overall population is estimated to have a hearing loss. The incidence of hearing loss, however, increases greatly among people age sixty-five and older. As medical advances extend life expectancies, elderly citizens become an ever greater component of the total population. This will increase demand for the services of hearing instrument dispensing specialists.

Adding to this demand is the large number of baby boomers now entering middle age, when the possibility of hearing impairment increases. Greater public awareness of the importance of early identification of hearing disorders will also add to the demand. Federal law already guarantees special services to all eligible children with hearing disabilities, and increased public awareness may eventually lead to greater insurance and Medicare reimbursement coverage of hearing related services for adults and the elderly.

Entry Methods

Individuals interested in this profession should make inquiries at local hearing instrument establishments. The owners may be able to give them information about training, education, and licensing requirements. Applications to manufacturers may also result in helpful information or job opportunities.

Some beginners start as employees of independent proprietors. They may start with on-the-job training and enroll in a program of study with IHS or another body to prepare for certification. The successful passing of exams will help them reach this status.

Advancement

Ambitious hearing instrument dispensing specialists maximize their work experiences. They continue their education through further courses, seminars, and workshops. They join and are active in professional organizations. They read literature and network with colleagues. All these activities help hearing instrument dispensing specialists get a broad perspective and prepare them for advancement.

Hearing instrument dispensing specialists who own their practice may achieve financial advancement by opening more offices. Those working as employees may set up their own practice. Experienced hearing instrument dispensing

specialists may go to work for a hearing instrument manufacturing company.

Some hearing instrument dispensing specialists are also audiologists. For this status, practitioners must have a master's degree in audiology or speech-language pathology. They must also meet state and professional standards of training and competence. More hearing instrument dispensing specialists are moving into the field of managed health care. With further training in an allied health care discipline, hearing instrument dispensing specialists may become multiskilled providers.

For Further Research

International Hearing Society, 16880 Middlebelt Road, Livonia, MI 48154. Web site: www.ihsinfo.org

National Board for Certification in Hearing Instrument Sciences, 16880 Middlebelt Road, Livonia, MI 48154. Web site: www.hearingnbc.org

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