

CENTRE FOR THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE SEMINAR SERIES 2010-2011 AUTUMN TERM

Tuesday, 3 May 2011 (Week 2)
5.00 pm – Ramphal Building Room R.014

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The Disappearing Hearing Aid: Spatiality in the History of the Management and Meaning of Hearing Loss.



Although among the UK's most widely used personal technologies for well over a century, the hearing aid is all but invisible in conventional social history, as well as in the histories of medicine, technology, and disability. Moreover, the combination of designers' discretion in adopting ever smaller designs combined with their users' embarrassed concealment of them has led to the effective disappearance of these mass-production devices from the manifest historical record. Yet collections of hearing aids, such as those held by the Thackray Medical Museum in Leeds, as well as patents, advertising, medical literature and catalogues demonstrate that there is a rich and complex history to be told of the diverse experiences and understanding of hearing aids as a means to handle (both deafness and of) hearing loss. In our paper we explore the dimensions of diversity in responses to the opportunities and challenges of using the hearing aid – to those who had undergone hearing loss whether through disease, accident or the ageing process. For example, there is the dimension of socio-economic class: whereas Queen Victoria or William Gladstone were happy to use intricately embellished silver hearing trumpets, the middle classes more typically sought out camouflaged aids that would allow their continued participation at social occasions and at work; by buying discretion they hoped to avoid the stigma of visible signs of hearing impairment.. By further contrast, without the economic resources to buy aids hidden in walking sticks, hair pieces or bonnets, the working classes tended either to buy tin trumpets or nothing at all, coping as best they could with social resources. The designs of many middle class hearing aids were clearly also heavily modulated by both issues of both gender and age

But to understand why hearing aids in their many diverse forms became so widely used from the later nineteenth century, we need to understand the various forces that brought them into being, shaped their form, and then propelled them into wider

usage. Was this phenomenon of the mass-production hearing aid supply-driven or demand-driven? The former view would see the evolution of hearing aids as shaped "externally" by wider developments in the science of acoustics, debates about deaf education (e.g. the 1880 Milan Congress, the pressure to use "natural" oral methods of communication and the visibility of Signing), the cultural meanings ascribed to the Deaf, and the rise of technologies of synthetic sound transmission, such as the speaking telephone in the late 1870s. The latter view of the provenance of hearing aids would examine the sufferers of hearing loss and their family as developing hearing aids as their preferred solution to the "problem" of hearing loss – just as the Deaf community developed sign language. There is indeed some strong evidence that several hearing aid designers and manufacturers were originally motivated to develop an aid due to their own experiences of hearing loss or partial deafness in a close family member; Overall we conclude with an analysis of the wider social practices and cultural understandings of hearing loss, as compared to deafness in the UK to get a better appreciation of the history of the hearing aid up to the formation and the distribution of the "Medresco" hearing aid in 1948 as a collaboration between the new National Health Service and the Post Office's expertise in micro-electronics



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