



Hear here, Mr. Gretzky; Great One's dad gets an earful after 44 years

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For years, Walter Gretzky has leaned over and tilted his body to the left.

It's not to slip a check like his famous son, but to hear better.

That's how he's been coping to hear people talk because he's been deaf in his right ear for 44 years.

But two months ago, Gretzky senior got fitted with a hearing aid. "A hearing aid can truly change (people's) lives and give them a different outlook," the 69-year-old said.

Canada's most famous hockey dad was working as a Bell telephone lineman in 1964 when a pulley came flying out of the manhole and struck him in the head.

"I was hit so hard it split my safety construction helmet in two," Gretzky told the Sunday Sun.

The accident left him in a coma and off work for 18 months.

He was lucky it didn't kill him.

"I had a fractured skull, severed nerves and damage to my inner ear and balance," Wayne's father said.

"They put me in the office for a year until I regained my balance and then I was back climbing telephone poles again until I retired in 1991."

Now he is the official spokesman for a Nevada-based private company called **HearAtLast** that sells hearing aids at more than 18 clinics located in Wal-Mart and Sam's Club stores in Ontario and Alberta.

HearAtLast plans to open a free-standing hearing clinic in North York next month.

Hearing tests were among a slew of health services the Ontario government delisted in August 2001.

Since then, the private sector has stepped in to fill the lucrative void the government created.

And clearly, companies such as **HearAtLast** are poised to expand.

"These types of strategically located hearing clinics are expected to become a bigger part of our expansion this year in both Canada and the United States," **HearAtLast** CEO Matthew Sacco said in a press release this month.

Several factors are fuelling private-sector expansion, including epidemic growth of hearing-damaged baby boomers, growing wait times for diagnosis and treatment and government cuts to hearing testing.

The cost of hearing aids, as much or more than \$2,000, is partially reimbursed through Ontario's Assistive Devices Program by the provincial government.

However, to qualify for funding -- up to \$500 for each hearing aid -- every three years, OHIP cardholders must be tested by an ear, nose or throat doctor, or a health worker under their supervision, and usually in a hospital.

There are more than a half-million Ontario residents with a hearing disability, 1.2 million in Canada.

And with this province's aging baby boom population, along with growing evidence of increased damage among young people and children, experts predict an epidemic.

Roughly 40% of seniors over the age of 65 have some degree of hearing loss.

It can take six months or longer for patients to see the specialist they need to qualify them for government assistance.

OHIP covers basic hearing tests conducted by doctors or "appropriately qualified employees" of physicians but more advanced tests are only covered if they are carried out by specialists -- ear, nose and throat doctors or certified audiologists working in public hospitals.

Audiologists in the private sector charge anywhere from \$60 to \$85 for full diagnostic hearing test.

However, companies such as **HearAtLast** are offering no-fee diagnostic hearing tests for patients who buy hearing aids at their clinics and fast, even one-hour service.

"Since delisting occurred, access to OHIP funded hearing tests has decreased and they have to be done in a hospital or in a physician's office ... which makes for longer wait lists," said Rex Banks, chief audiologist for the Canadian Hearing Society.

The Canadian Hearing Society provides hearing tests at no cost to patients.

"Some people may be willing to pay, but they might be lured in by the free hearing test," Banks said.

"The reality is if OHIP still paid for hearing tests, then people could get independent hearing tests without worrying about a catch of a hearing aid."

One consequence of the growth of private hearing care is fewer specialists working in public health care and two-tier health care.