



Walter Gretzky's new cause: helping the hearing-impaired

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IEN: Hearing loss is a growing problem among Canadians. About 23 percent of adults say they have some form of impairment. But in many cases these problems go undetected. Now Canada's most famous hockey dad is sharing his personal story to raise awareness about the importance of getting a hearing test.

Joining us this morning are Walter Gretzky along with the president of **HearAtLast**, Robert Oswald.

Gentlemen, it's good to have you both here. Walter, we were just talking about your personal story. You lived with hearing loss for more than 40 years.

WALTER GRETZKY Since 1964. I had an accident at Bell Canada where a frame hit me in the back of the head. It fractured my skull, severed all my nerves. Totally deaf in my right ear.

IEN: And what was the worst part of being hearing-impaired that way?

WALTER GRETZKY Well, people who don't know you're deaf think that you're ignoring them if they speak to you.

For example, I remember, in particular, one day I was going down to Hamilton with a friend. And we got back from Hamilton. My wife Phyllis said, "How was the trip?" He said, "Fine. But you know what? There's something wrong with Walter. I tried to talk to him all the way to Hamilton and back. He wouldn't answer." She said, "Did you not know he is deaf in his right ear?" And he spoke very softly, this gentleman. And --

IEN: You just couldn't hear him?

WALTER GRETZKY No. And he thought I was ignoring him.

IEN: I would think a lot of people would be in the same situation or maybe they don't know what to do, they don't know where to go, when it comes to hearing loss.

ROBERT OSWALD: Well, most people associate hearing loss with age. And there's enough data and statistics out in North America now to show that hearing loss affects us across all generations, and that most people don't know where to get their hearing tested.

So, the whole **HearAtLast** model is to make it convenient. We've taken the cost out by absorbing the cost of doing the test within our clinics. We do a complete, comprehensive hearing test. It takes approximately an hour. It's done by a certified specialist in any one of our clinics.

IEN: Show us some of the product while you're talking, because I know that Walter is wearing a hearing aid. And you can hardly see it.

ROBERT OSWALD: Well, you can't see them. I mean, the one that I'm wearing as well, I mean, they are virtually invisible. And that's been the biggest problem with hearing aids historically, is: stigma, price and convenience.

So, we have dealt with the price issue by having a low dispensing fee. And the stigma is gone because these are virtually invisible. So, when they actually fit to your hearing loss, in most cases, a lot of people can wear these new, open-fit products, they are virtually invisible.

So, when you look at what you are wearing right now on TV for your own monitor, you're using a quite a heavy tubing. So, this tubing here is very thin. And, again, it's very simple to wear and use.

IEN: And you are the ambassador for this company. As you hear other people's stories, Walter, because I'm sure that as you go out and speak, what strikes you about the stories that you're hearing?

WALTER GRETZKY Well, all the same thing, like what I mentioned. It's so sad, somebody has got the wrong impression of a friend or someone who they've just met, simply because that person never heard them talking. Didn't know they were talking to them. And they thought they were ignoring them.

IEN: Why did you leave it for so long?

WALTER GRETZKY I didn't even know about this.

IEN: You had no clue? You just thought this was just part of you getting older?

WALTER GRETZKY No, no, when I say I didn't know about this, that there was something that could help me to hear.

IEN: Could help you to hear. You just thought it was something you had to live with.

WALTER GRETZKY Yeah, yeah. And I have since 1964.

IEN: That's a long time.

ROBERT OSWALD: Yeah, for too long the traditional medical system has shunned from sending people off for a hearing test in the masses. And, again, we have a model now that enables people to come in, they can do a screening test, a hearing test. And hearing aids really do benefit the majority of people.

In Walter's case there is very little we can do for his dead ear. But we can help him on his other side. So, it makes his communication skills that much better long-term.

IEN: And on that note, we are going to end this, gentlemen. But it's so good to have you here. It's the No. 1 occupational hazard. So, it's worth a listen to, in fact. Thank you so much.

ROBERT OSWALD: Thank you very much.

WALTER GRETZKY Thank you for having us on.

IEN: Oh, you're welcome.