Hearing aids and personal sound amplifiers: what is the difference?

Consumers should be careful when contemplating purchasing aids to assist hearing (particularly from unknown overseas Internet sites) without having an appropriate assessment from a qualified hearing practitioner.

You may have seen advertisements in magazines, brochures, catalogues and on the internet for low cost small electronic sound amplifiers known as Personal Sound Amplification Products (PSAPs) which look similar to hearing aids. PSAPs are not the same as hearing aids and have different uses.

Hearing aids are specifically designed to help people manage hearing loss. A qualified hearing practitioner can provide appropriate diagnosis and ensure that when a hearing aid is fitted it is programmed or adjusted to suit the particular range of hearing loss for an individual patient.

What are PSAPs used for?
PSAPs are intended to be used by people with normal hearing who want to amplify sounds in certain environments, such as to watch television without disturbing other people nearby, or bird watching. PSAPs may help people hear things that are at low volume or at a distance, but they should not be mistaken for, or used as substitutes for, approved hearing aids as they are not designed to help a person manage their hearing loss.

Are there potential risks in wearing a PSAP?
Consumers should only purchase a PSAP if they have been assessed by a qualified hearing practitioner as not having hearing loss. A person who chooses to wear a PSAP because they are having difficulty hearing, may actually be causing themselves harm by over-amplifying sounds which they may already hear and by delaying the diagnosis and proper treatment of the underlying reason for their hearing loss. Some reports suggest caution be exercised in fitting any amplification device because of the potential for noise-induced hearing loss.

Are PSAPs supplied in Australia?
While it does not appear that PSAPs are generally being supplied in Australia, they may be advertised for purchase via mail order catalogues or online from overseas suppliers.
Are PSAPs regulated in Australia?

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) considers the intended purpose or use of a hearing loss product when deciding whether it should be regulated as a medical device for supply in Australia. The intended purpose is determined by the manufacturer. However, the TGA also takes into account representations made on the product label, and any promotional and other materials provided with the product.

Hearing aids are typically promoted to manage a person’s hearing loss and include information about the types and severity of hearing loss. These are assessed by the TGA for quality and performance prior to approval for supply in Australia. The TGA does not regulate hearing aids which are imported by individuals for personal use.

PSAPs are not considered to be therapeutic goods and are therefore not regulated by the TGA.

Where should I seek further assistance and information?

If you suspect that you may have hearing loss you should see a doctor or qualified hearing practitioner to have your hearing properly tested and assessed.

Additional information on hearing and hearing loss is also available in Client Information section on the Hearing Services Program’s website.