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The Hearing Aid As Fashion Statement

THIS hearing aid looks more like an earring. Its tiny triangular body comes in exuberant colors like sunset orange, racing green or cabernet red; a slender wisp of wire uncoils gracefully from the body to an earpod no bigger than a teardrop.

But it is indeed a hearing appliance, made by the Danish company Oticon. It is called Delta, after its triangular housing that contains the microphones and signal-processing electronics. Introduced in May, the device is designed for people typically in their 40's, 50's or older who are starting to lose the ability to hear high-pitched sounds but hate doing anything about it.

"This new design is appealing to people who traditionally are reluctant to seek help" for hearing loss, said Ed Bravo, an audiologist at Audio Help Associates in New York. An appliance that looks this hip, though, may overcome that barrier; Dr. Bravo has fitted many clients with it since May.

The hearing aid costs about \$2,000 to \$3,000, depending on the model; typically, people need one for each ear, said Gordon Wilson, vice president for marketing at the company's American headquarters in Somerset, N.J.

Customers are drawn by both the smallness of the device — it's hard to see unless wearers lift their hair and push down the tops of their ears — and its smart appearance, said John Voss, who has fitted patients with it at Hearing Associates' offices in Duluth and Grand Rapids, Minn. "People want the smallness so no one will see it, but once they get it, they are happy to show it off."

Cathleen Osborn, 45, who has dark brown hair, picked a pair of hearing aids with a leopard-skin design sold by Harbor Audiology and Hearing Services in Gig Harbor, Wash. "They go with my hair — and my personality," she said, but added that the devices were usually not noticeable. "From the day I wore them, they just completely changed my world," she said. "I can hear people talking in the back of the car. I can even hear whippers."

The device is not for every hearing loss, said Dennis L. Kisiel, an audiologist in New York City. "It's typically for younger people, but also for people in their 80's and even 90's in the early stages of hearing loss" who have problems understanding conversations in noisy restaurants or at meetings, he said. "These people need amplification in the high frequencies" as well as programming that helps the device reduce background noise.

Once hearing loss becomes severe, though, and low- and mid-range frequencies are affected, Delta has drawbacks, he said. The small batteries have a relatively short life, typically five to seven days. "My patients tend to wear this device much longer than other instruments they've had," he said, and are sometimes bothered by having to change the batteries. And its extreme smallness could pose difficulties for elderly persons whose hands shake, Dr. Kisiel added.

Other companies have effective hearing aids, he said, but none with quite the same stylish design.

The details of style are no accident, said Mr. Wilson of Oticon. The Delta incorporates much of the same technology found in an earlier Oticon product, the Syncro, introduced in 2004, including software that mim-



ics natural hearing. But many potential users would not give the technology a try, he said: "People just didn't want to be seen wearing a hearing aid."

Indeed, many people have strong aversions to hearing aids, said Dr. Robert Green, an ear, nose and throat specialist in Manhattan who was amused to learn that there was a hearing aid with the moxie to come in a color like "green chameleon." "Unfortunately, there is a powerful stigma attached to hearing aids," he said. "People don't think twice about getting eyeglasses, but hearing aids are a different story."

In 2004, Oticon hired the consulting firm Olson Zaltman Associates to help it address this aversion. "We found that some people used cost as an excuse to postpone the purchase," said Lindsay Zaltman, managing director of the company, speaking from the company's office in Pittsburgh. But there were also deeper issues. Hearing aids were perceived as "a neon sign on your forehead saying, 'I'm flawed, I'm old,'" he said.

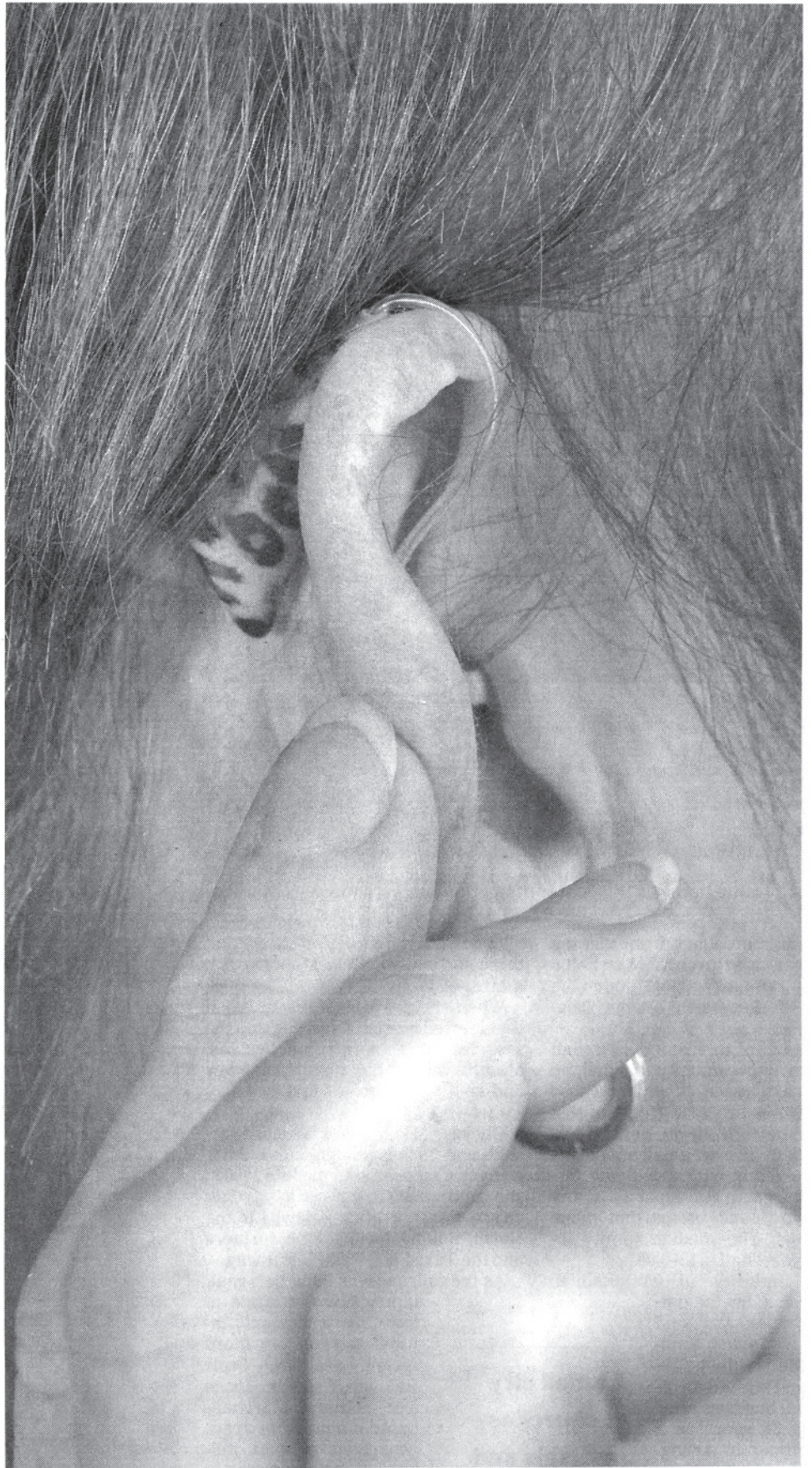
The brash new styling of the Delta is part of a strategy to fight this impression. In a trial study of people who wore the device for a few weeks, some users said their friends mistook the hearing aids for wireless headsets used with cellphones, Mr. Zaltman said. "So this thing with a negative stigma started to change to something smarter and cooler-looking, taking on this idea that you could want people to see this."

It's too early to know if the strategy is working, but Mr. Wilson says sales have been brisk. "Reader surveys show that customers are happy with Delta," he said.

Richard Bennett, 60, a banker who lives in Punta Gorda, Fla., is one of those customers. He hesitated before the purchase. "It was four months of soul searching," he said. "I felt I couldn't possibly be old enough to need a hearing aid."

He finally bought a pair of Deltas at Audiology Consultants of Southwest Florida in Cape Coral, and left its office with them on. "I could hear the keys in my pocket making noise," he said. His color of choice was gray, to match his hair. "I wouldn't choose alligator skin," he said. "That's not me."

He now wears the devices morning to night. "I put them in a little before sunrise,



before I walk the dog, so that I can listen to the birds," he said.

The hearing aid must be working fairly well: Mr. Bennett was speaking on a cellphone when being interviewed, and though the connection was poor, he had no difficulties.

OTHER companies make unobtrusive, behind-the-ear hearing aids with the same underlying approach, called open-fit. These devices leave most of the ear canal open, avoiding the "bottled in" feeling of hearing aids that cover the canal. Phonak, a Swiss company, includes among its products the microSavia, a tiny open-fit aid that has its instrumentation behind the ear, bringing the sound into the ear through a slim tube.

The Delta, though also a behind-the-ear device, separates the tiny speaker from the main unit behind the ear and tucks it instead into a small portion of the ear canal. But putting the speaker there could lead to problems if users removed the speakers from their ears and then handled them carelessly, said David A. Fabry, vice president for professional relations and education at Pho-

nak's United States headquarters in Warrenville, Ill. "If they stick them in a pocket, they could be damaged."

On the contrary, Mr. Wilson said, the speakers are designed to be extremely robust. "You can stretch and bend them," he said. "They are tough."

Todd A. Ricketts, an associate professor at Vanderbilt University who does research on hearing aids, says open-fit devices have become extremely popular in the past few years. But, he cautioned, the devices should be worn primarily by people with high-frequency loss. "The potential negative," he said, "is overselling this technology to people who have hearing loss in the low pitches or frequencies."

The Oticon devices may be expensive, but Robert Gamble of Cloquet, Minn., is pleased with them. "I never thought I'd pay \$6,000, but that's what I've done and it's well worth it," he said.

He also got an additional benefit from the Deltas: "I graduated from Princeton. The colors there are orange and black, and I made it a point to choose orange" for the devices, he said. "People do notice. I'm enjoying that." □