

# Students say, despite technology, human element is key

By Donald J. Schum

All great professions are guided by the seasoned, but driven by the young.

Audiology is no different. For the past decade, Oticon, Inc., has striven to do what it can to enhance the educational process for graduate students in audiology. Among other initiatives, we have hosted a camp every summer for the past 7 years in Keystone, CO. Focusing on advanced technology and clinical practice in amplification, we have supported student research and offered an audiologic lecture series at universities across the country. This year, in celebration of Oticon's 100-year anniversary, we have joined forces with the Copenhagen-based Oticon Foundation to offer scholarships to 100 graduate students in audiology.

As part of the application process for these \$600 awards, the students were required to write a 500-word essay in response to the question, "Why is a people-oriented profession still relevant in an increasingly technology-oriented society?" Given Oticon's People First philosophy, we were interested in seeing how the next generation of professionals view their role in an era in which hearing aid technology is evolving so rapidly. The results provide testament that the future of audiology is in the hands of talented and insightful individuals who will continue to respect our humanistic heritage.

Of course, all of the applicants pointed to the importance of a strong relationship between the patient and the professional, and they agreed that technology should never be viewed as a substitute for the patient-audiologist relationship. However, a handful of students demonstrated an important insight into the role of the professional in the relationship between the professional and technology. They recognized the value that technology can offer patients with hearing loss, but also perceived that this value can only be fully realized via the intervention of the professional audiologist.

## HUMAN NEEDS DRIVE TECHNOLOGY

Technology does not advance for its own sake. Rather, technologic advances are driven by human needs. Therefore, technology should not be viewed as de-humanizing. Quite the opposite. Technology offers the user the opportunity to reach his or her greatest potential. Or, as Rosalinda Baca of the University of Colorado said, "Society is not losing its interest in people by being technology driven; rather, technology is a key to address the increasing needs of people."

However, in our field, someone must be the link between technology and the patient. Alexandra Vetrovski of Central Michigan University noted, "Technology makes peo-

ple curious. That's how it gets invented and why it continues to be used. Yet not everyone in the world is gifted in understanding...so the unknowledgeable turn to the knowledgeable."

Technologic advances continually open a broader and broader range of potential solutions. But these solutions must be tailored to the needs of the end user. The professional plays *the* vital role in ensuring that this takes place.

Virginia Ramachandra of Wayne State University explained, "The labor-saving aspect of technology serves to enhance and highlight the people-oriented nature of the profession, while the advent of new technologies creates areas of possibility. Professionals must adapt the technology to the goals of the consumer."

"There is no doubt that technology will continue to advance our society and allow jobs to become easier and more efficient, but technology can take us only so far," cautioned Emily Bondus of Purdue University. She added, "People have to step in and make technology understandable and usable for others. There is a value-added partnership between humans and technology [that] will continue to change our world."

As we move into the future, the role of the professional as the interface between technology and the patient should only be expected to increase. Erin McAlister of the University of Maryland put it this way: "The increasing prominence of technology in our society only enhances the need for people-oriented professions to facilitate successful relationships between human needs and the potential benefits of technology."

Our profession will continue to be challenged to produce new professionals who possess both the technical expertise to understand new technology as it is developed and the skill to unlock the potential of these new solutions for the patient.

It is clear that these scholarship-winning students have been positively influenced by their professors and clinical instructors. Already they have seen that there is an important role for technology in the treatment of hearing loss, and they have also realized that the full potential of this technology can be achieved only when it is managed within a larger, patient-centered process. We congratulate these students and wish them well as they prepare to enter their professional lives. We are proud to be part of their development. (HJ)

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