



A Proven Method for Integrating LACE Into a Hearing Aid Practice

By Kathy Amos, audiologist and owner of Posey's Hearing Aid Center, Walnut Creek California

Seventeen years ago I started Posey's Hearing Aid Center in Walnut Creek, California, a San Francisco Bay Area suburb, having learned the hearing healthcare profession from my parents who started the original Posey's more than 50 years ago in the California Central Valley. In 2007, we opened two satellite clinics and watched our business more than double. Unfortunately, we also experienced a significant increase in hearing aids returned for credit. By January 2008 when returns exceeded 20%, we decided to take action.

After reading several journal articles about LACE we decided to make a serious effort at implementing it and through their help line contacted Neurotone headquarters directly. Since they are also located in the San Francisco Bay Area, they agreed to work closely with us to develop an effective method of integrating LACE into our hearing aid dispensing practice. This started with several hours of on-site training at our headquarters and continued with periodic visits and conference calls over the next few months.

All of our practitioners went through LACE training themselves and were taught how to present LACE as one of the two key elements – amplification plus auditory training – in the solution to the patient's hearing loss.

Implementation of LACE began in early February, and we quickly started seeing dramatic reductions in returns. This made us even more convinced that LACE needed to be part of Posey's DNA. However, getting 100% of our staff to buy into the program such that every patient undertakes LACE training was by no means easy. This was the challenge of changing our practitioners' habits, some of whom had been dispensing hearing aids for over 20 years. We ultimately had to part company with one of our most experienced people, simply because he was so set in his ways that he refused to change procedures and adopt the use of LACE, despite his return rate being over 20%.

After the first month we knew that LACE was effective in improving the patient's listening abilities. The key then became increasing compliance, since our success would depend strictly on increasing the percentage of patients who actually do the LACE training sessions. To encourage compliance, we implemented a series of prizes:

- Finish 5 LACE sessions and get a free digital battery tester.
- Finish 10 sessions and get six months worth of free batteries.
- Finish all 20 sessions and get an extra year warranty on your hearing aids.

When we implemented this incentive program in May, it had an immediate and significant effect on patient compliance and was a big help in getting us up to our current 80% level.

By late March, LACE was implemented 100% in all three Posey's clinics such that every hearing aid patient receives LACE auditory training as a standard part of their therapy. Today we are dispensing 100 copies of LACE per month. This includes sales to existing patients who come in for periodic checkups and cleanings. We offer LACE at our front counter for \$100, as it will benefit existing hearing aid wearers just as much as people getting new hearing aids. Moreover we believe that, with the performance feedback provided to the patient by our practitioners using Neurotone Pro, LACE binds our patients more closely to Posey's and ensures that they will always come back to us when they need new hearing aids.

We continued our close working relationship with Neurotone and acted as their test clinic for their new version, LACE 4. One of the things we discovered is that patients were getting frustrated with their first session of LACE. Patients complained that Session 1 was complicated, lengthy, and that it was difficult to figure out the basic controls. During this time we discovered that by taking the patient through their initial LACE session in the clinic on the day of fitting, we were able to provide needed encouragement and instruct them on the use of the software. We found this to be extremely beneficial and to significantly increase the percentage of patients who actually go on and do their LACE training at home or in the clinic.

We believed that LACE training offered such a large potential to improve our practice that I decided to become the "LACE Coach" for the first few months of implementation. This meant that I sat with patients after the fitting and took them through their first LACE session. I advised Neurotone to reduce the length of Session 1 so that the practitioner or LACE Coach can get through it quickly right after the fitting and to modify LACE such that the practitioner could send the patient home to continue their LACE training on their own computer. In the new version, Neurotone has reduced the length of Session 1 to 12 minutes, including the QuickSIN test, and modified LACE to enable patients to either train in clinic or at home on the same Neurotone Pro patient record

Over the past six months, Posey's has dispensed over 500 copies of LACE. Out of the 80% who have done at least one LACE session at home, *only two* have returned their hearing aids. One patient had done two LACE sessions and the other did three. So it would seem from our results over six months with several hundred patients that if the patient gets past the first five LACE sessions, the hearing aids are not returned.

Given that we started the year with over 20% returns, LACE has made a dramatic contribution to our top line revenue. But this contribution to our profitability is not the most important result of implementing LACE. By far the most significant impact of the LACE program is the increase in our patients' communication confidence and,

consequently, customer satisfaction. You can see it and feel it in our waiting room. We no longer have patients sitting there holding small paper bags with the hearing aids they are returning. Instead, they are smiling and talking to each other; almost always about their LACE training, trading anecdotes about which LACE exercises they find most enjoyable or most challenging and how they have seen their abilities to understand what people are saying in noisy environments improve.

We have also experienced a significant increase in new patients, many of whom were encouraged by a friend to come to Posey's for their hearing aids because we are the only ones in the area offering this special auditory training. After 20 years in the hearing aid business, it is a pleasure to finally experience positive word-of-mouth in the community!

Don't get me wrong – implementing LACE and getting all of our staff to change their habits was by no means easy. It took a lot of hard work over several months. Now that LACE is such an integral part of our protocol, there's no way we would ever go back to an amplification-only solution with no auditory training; we know that would be a major disservice to our patients.

The new LACE 4 combines the ability to do the first LACE session in the clinic with two take-home discs – a CD for computer owners and a DVD for people without home computers. The added flexibility of the DVD version, combined with periodic standardized LACE testing in the clinic (QuickSIN™, Rapid Speech, Competing Speaker) means that we can now provide home-based LACE training to virtually all our patients. We are confident that with the DVD our compliance figure will increase further and probably exceed 90% fairly quickly. That said, we still have some of our patients who prefer to do LACE training here in the clinic. We encourage this, as it only adds to the positive atmosphere in the clinic and promotes interaction among patients who have enthusiastically undertaken the responsibility for their auditory training.

LACE has produced a fundamental and positive change in our patient relationships:

- They are impressed that Posey's is not just trying to sell them hearing aids but instead offering a multipart solution to their hearing loss.
- They quickly understand that they now have an active role to play and must take responsibility for their auditory training.
- Most importantly, LACE enables the patient to feel more in control of their communication abilities and boosts their confidence that they can better understand speech in difficult situations like noisy restaurants.

After the first few months, I transferred my LACE Coach responsibilities to one of the front office staff in each of our clinics. This relieves our practitioners of getting each patient up to speed on LACE. Instead, immediately after the fitting, the practitioner hands off the patient to the LACE Coach, who then works with the patient through their initial LACE session. The patient then continues LACE training on their own in the clinic or at home on their computer or DVD player. We have found that on follow-up visits, the patients are much more interested in going over their LACE results than spending time with the practitioner about their hearing aids.

When we introduced the LACE program at the beginning of this year, our practitioners' biggest fear was that it would increase the amount of time they need to spend with each patient. This was the main point of resistance to adopting LACE as they are all working in a rapidly growing practice with little or no time to spare. Consequently, our practitioners were pleasantly surprised to discover that LACE instead does the opposite and *reduces* their time per patient. This is probably one of the biggest reasons why our practitioners are now so enthusiastic about having LACE integrated into their protocol.

Based on our experience at Posey's this year, here are the keys to successfully integrating LACE into a hearing aid practice:

- Get buy-in from all your practitioners.
 - Have each of them do at least five sessions of LACE themselves.
 - Provide sufficient training through Neurotone webinars and videos on the Neurotone website.
- Make LACE a standard part of your protocol, not an option. The total solution is amplification plus auditory training. Tell the patient that the first 10 sessions of LACE are mandatory. Don't leave the auditory training decision up to the patient; they want *you* to be the expert.
- If you have the personnel, appoint and train a LACE Coach to take the auditory training workload off the practitioners.
- Do everything possible to maximize patient compliance:
 - Take the patient through the LACE demo and give them the brochure on the day of consultation.
 - Most importantly, take the patient through Session 1 in the clinic on the day of fitting.
 - Use all the resources on Neurotone Pro, including the Automated Patient E-mail Service, to increase compliance.
 - Print out the patient's performance graphs and review them with the patient during follow-up visits to show them how they're doing. LACE is like a game, and you can't enjoy a game if you can't see the scoreboard once in a while.
 - Provide inexpensive rewards to recognize patients for their efforts in completing certain numbers of LACE sessions. It's amazing what people will do for a little recognition.
- Take advantage of the flexibility of the LACE system: in-clinic training with LACE CE, or at-home training with a home computer or DVD player and television.
- Encourage your existing patients to undertake LACE training; you don't need new hearing aids to learn how to listen better.

This may sound like quite a complicated series of steps you need to take to integrate LACE auditory training into a hearing aid practice, but it's not. You'll find once you get into it that implementing LACE is actually fairly simple and straightforward. All it takes is commitment on your part. Once LACE becomes an integral part of your protocol, you will discover that the changes in returns, customer satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth in your community are enormous.