

# Improving communication with patients who have a hearing impairment



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## Why good communication is important

- to provide reassurance, as many patients in clinics or hospitals feel anxious
- to create a relationship based on trust between healthcare providers and patients
- to make a more accurate diagnosis of the patient's illness
- to ensure that the patient understands what treatment is being offered
- to ensure that instructions given are correctly understood by the patient
- to improve compliance with treatment or referral
- to improve the credibility of healthcare workers and the way they are perceived by patients.

## Barriers to communication

Deaf or hearing-impaired patients, with or without hearing instruments, may communicate in a variety of ways with health personnel: some patients speak and speech read or lip read, some use sign language or communicate by writing notes, and some bring someone with them to interpret.

Undesirable misunderstandings are more common when communication barriers exist. For those who are hearing-impaired, the main barriers are social rather than physical. People with hearing impairment are not always included in social situations and the attitude adopted towards them by others, including by health personnel, may hinder communication in different ways.

**Examination of a deaf child in the presence of an interpreter. The doctor (right) is facing his young patient and has a pen and paper at hand. KENYA**



## INSTRUCTIONS TO HEARING-IMPAIRED PERSONS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH THEIR HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

- A hearing impairment is often invisible. Please inform us if you have a hearing loss.
- Tell the doctor how you prefer to communicate and we will try to help as much as possible.
- Please wear your hearing aids if you have them and find them helpful.
- We can provide you with a sign language interpreter.\*
- Do not hesitate to ask for repetition if you do not understand.

\*If this service is available in your health facility

Many healthcare providers believe that it is difficult and time-consuming to communicate with patients who are hearing-impaired. Sign language interpreters are difficult to find, even more so interpreters who are culturally and personally sensitive.

Patients with a hearing impairment may feel discouraged that the practitioner is not directly interacting with them (e.g. talking about them rather than to them). They may not feel comfortable enough to express their needs if staff are not aware of them. For example, if the consultation room does not offer privacy, asking health personnel to speak loudly can be embarrassing when you do not want others to know about your condition.

Patients with a hearing impairment have the same rights to full information as other patients, yet they can face prolonged or unnecessary illnesses due to inadequate communication with their healthcare providers. This article suggests simple steps to improve communication with hearing-impaired persons.

## In the waiting room and reception area

Waiting areas in clinics can be very busy and noisy places. Patients with a very severe or profound hearing loss will not hear shouted instructions or staff calling out their name. Those with moderate hearing loss can also have difficulty if the waiting room is very noisy. Patients wearing a hearing aid may need to turn the volume down to avoid discomfort and so will hear less well than usual.

In a primary healthcare facility, there is likely to be a mix of all sorts of patients, some of whom will have a hearing impairment. It is helpful to make the following general provisions:

- In the waiting room, in addition to calling out the patient's name when it is his/her turn to be seen, use a number system or a sign (e.g. a board with the patient's name written on it).



In the waiting room of any primary health centre, some patients are likely to have a hearing impairment. **IVORY COAST**

- Put the most important information (e.g. consultation fees) in writing, on clearly displayed signs.
- Put up a sign in your waiting room for patients with hearing impairment, indicating how they may contribute to improved communication (see Box on page 10) and whether a sign language interpreter is available.
- If a patient with hearing impairment calls in advance to make an appointment (or if someone else calls on his/her behalf), ask how the patient prefers to communicate and whether a sign language interpreter is needed.
- If you know a patient is deaf or hearing-impaired, make sure the consultation takes place in a suitable setting (see next section).

## During a clinical appointment

### Improving the way you communicate

The Box on the right offers suggestions to improve communication with a hearing-impaired person at a clinical appointment. Keep in mind that what matters is not what you say, but what the patient understands.

### Understanding the responses of a hearing-impaired person

If a patient is able to speak and presents with mild hearing loss, then his/her speech may be normal. The speech of patients with moderate to severe hearing losses may be difficult to understand. The ends of words may be left out in their speech, as well as the small joining words, e.g. 'and', 'to' and 'but'.

It is important to know what a patient is saying in order to communicate effectively.

If a family member has accompanied the patient, this person may be able to help – as long as the patient agrees to it. However, do not forget that you should still be communicating primarily with the patient and not the person accompanying him/her.

Sometimes patients have reservations about being asked questions in front of family members. This can be the case whether the patient speaks or uses sign language. Patients with a severe hearing loss may prefer to be seen alone and communicate in writing during the consultation.

Having a member of the clinic staff trained as a sign language interpreter can be very useful. It will help you understand the patient's responses with greater accuracy and will help keep the patient's information private.

If you are not sure you have understood the patient's responses, ask again.

## COMMUNICATING WITH A HEARING-IMPAIRED PERSON AT A CLINICAL APPOINTMENT

### 1 Make adequate provisions in the consultation room

- Give the patient privacy: they should be able to ask you to raise your voice without fear that others will hear about their medical history.
- Minimise distractions. This is even more important if your patient is a child.
- Reduce background noise as much as possible.
- Ensure the room is well lit, so that the patient can see your face or any written information they may be given.
- Ask the patient to wear their hearing aids (if they have them and find them helpful) and sit closer to them than you would to another patient.
- If possible, have a helper in the room of the same gender as the patient.
- When adult patients have come accompanied, always ask them before you start if they would prefer to be alone with health personnel in the consultation room. Do not wait until the questions become uncomfortable for the patient.

### 2 Remember that your face is an essential communication tool

- Face the patient, not their interpreter or carer.
- Remove your mask and face shield.
- Do not have anything between your lips (cigarette, pen, etc.) or in your mouth (chewing gum, sweets, etc.) as this can distort lip movement when speaking. Avoid placing your hand or an object in front of your mouth when talking.
- Have the light on your face rather than on the person you are talking to. This makes it easier for them to read facial expressions and to lip read.
- Support your speech with facial expression where you can, e.g. look happy if you are giving good news and sad if you are giving bad news.
- When signing, hold your hands up at chest level to enable both your face and hands to be clearly seen.
- Understand and use the local culture of gestures, expressions and accepted physical contact (or absence of it).

### 3 Ensure that you speak effectively

- Speak normally, not too fast or too slowly. Certain sounds can be distorted or lost if speech is rushed or slowed down too much.
- Use short, simple sentences.
- Do not exaggerate your speech or lip movements.
- Ask questions if you are not sure you understand what the patient is saying.
- Patients tend to agree with their health workers, sometimes without understanding what has been said to them. After every important point or message, ask the patient if he/she has understood you and, if necessary, ask him/her to repeat the message or instructions back to you (this is especially important if the patient is unaccompanied).

### 4 Use other means of communication, e.g. writing and signing

- If the patient can sign, use an interpreter. If at all possible, learn the local sign language yourself.
- Be prepared to write down any questions or answers and give the hearing-impaired person the opportunity to do the same if necessary.
- Write down important information to give to the patient, e.g. instructions for taking medicines.
- Use pictures and drawings to ensure that the patient understands your instructions.