

Medical Communication Access Strategies for Patients with Hearing Loss

By Richard Herring and Valerie Stafford-Mallis

Are you or a loved one anticipating a visit to the hospital or the doctor's office? Are you concerned about being able to hear well and communicate effectively with your treatment providers – especially if you have to remove your hearing aids or cochlear implants? If you are, this paper is written for you, to give you some tools you can use to improve communication access in the medical environment. Believe it or not, there are many simple things you can do to tip the scales of effective communication in your favor.

Medical staff cannot see by looking at you how hard-of-hearing you are. It's not the same as using a wheelchair or black glasses/white cane or walker which alerts one to a disability. Hearing loss is an invisible disability that is often not well understood. Therefore, you must be prepared to educate and inform all health care treatment providers who come into contact with you that you are hard of hearing. You must show them what you need in order to be able to effectively communicate. This means that you yourself must know your hearing loss and what helps you to communicate effectively.

When we don't hear well, we must take the initiative to orchestrate our treatment in waiting offices by making our hearing loss “visible”. We are the masters of our fate. Remember, “Barking dogs get the bone.” The first rule is “Don't Bluff!” If you have not heard or understood something, keep asking until you do!

Personal:

A necklace or bracelet medical ID could significantly help emergency medical services provide wearers with the correct care for their conditions. An ID could ultimately save a life especially if one becomes involved in an accident and becomes incommunicado. Don't know where to get a medical alert bracelet or necklace? One source for cochlear implant wearers is The Gift of Hearing Foundation.

http://www.giftofhearingfoundation.org/MediBraceletOrderForm_3-8-13.pdf

There are other purveyors of medical alert bracelets for persons who are deaf and hard of hearing. Simply Google hearing+loss+medical+alert+bracelets and a list of many sources will appear.

At a medical office waiting room:

It is wise to let medical staff know as soon as you check in that you will need a visual alert or a tap on the shoulder when your name is being called. Here are some relevant tips:

1. Call attention to your hearing loss with the receptionist and the staff person who escorts you out of the waiting room.
2. Consider wearing a hearing loss attention button or pin.

3. Use stickers displaying the national symbol of deafness to affix to one's patient file.
4. Fill out any questionnaires and write on them "patient cannot hear well and uses assistive listening devices."

At the Admissions Office:

1. At the admissions office, you are asked to sign a consent/agreement form as a patient undergoing surgery or procedure. Be sure to write on this paper the following statements as applicable:
 - I have a hearing loss
 - I need the following in order to communicate effectively with my treatment team (and then explain what that is)
 - I have been advised the following will be done with my assistive listening devices while I am incapacitated for safe keeping (and then list what you have been told)
 - I have hearing aid(s) or cochlear implant processor(s) which are costly to replace. The hospital is responsible for any damage, loss, or theft of the equipment. The value of replacement is \$_____
2. Get two copies of the agreement showing your written statements to increase your chances of being reimbursed in case of damage/loss/theft of your equipment.
3. Express appreciation for the help you've received.

When surgery or in-hospital procedure is necessary:

Make sure the hospital admitting office knows that because of your hearing loss you wear a hearing aid or have a cochlear implant processor. Here are more relevant tips:

1. Bring a notepad and pen with you to use for effective communication if you get stuck with a word or a sentence spoken by the doctor.
2. If you are not able to understand speech, ask to receive everything in writing.
3. Ask staff to approach you when requiring information. Do not allow staff to direct questions and comments to the person accompanying you - you are the patient and you alone are responsible for answering questions correctly.
4. Explain that you are hard of hearing and how that affects you.
5. In advance of your surgery or procedure, visit the Hospital Patient representative or Advocate to request what specific assistive listening equipment you need. Explain the nature of your hearing loss - mild, severe, or profound.
6. Give them a copy of your hospital communication flyer. Be certain all the things you need in order to establish effective communication are written down.
7. Make a notation documenting your hearing loss and what you need for effective communication on the Consent for Surgery or Medical Procedure. Hand write it in or make a note that a separate information sheet has been given to the health care provider with instruction that it be prominently displayed in the medical

- records. This document is the legal contract between you and the treatment provider.
8. Suggest that a prominent note or poster be put on your bed to alert all staff about your hearing loss.
 9. Be prepared to repeat the education and information process with every member of your treatment team: phlebotomist who takes your blood, x-ray technician who does your chest x-ray, pre-op nurse who has you change into a hospital gown, anesthesiologist who puts you to sleep...everybody! Ask people to remove their masks when speaking to you if at all possible. Explain you must be able to see their faces in order to understand them.
 10. Express your appreciation for the help you have received.
 11. Be sure to get the business card of the admitting representative with all of his/her contact information. The Americans with Disabilities Act mandates for patients to require the hospital to provide effective communication to you and to give primary preference to the accommodations you advise them which work best for you.

Surgical masks used at the hospital

Surgical masks are used to prevent transmission of diseases in the hospital and are worn by many nurses tending to patients. Those masks are barriers to communication for patients who rely on speech reading (lip reading). Some hospitals have surgical masks with plastic cut away sections that enable one to see the lips of the staff wearing them. Patients who prefer to speech read the nurses tending to them may request them wear those masks if the hospital has them. Find out before-hand.

Shortcomings/Discrimination

Finally, if a patient experiences shortcoming in communication access, lack of sensitivity among hospital personnel or feelings of helplessness because of inability to hear well, he or she may write a letter with their observations and ask that the hospital improve its protocol for patients with all degrees of hearing loss. A copy of this letter may be sent to the state Hospital Association where the patient resides.

If you are unsure what your rights and responsibilities are as they relate to medical communication access, consult the Department of Justice's ADA Business Brief: Communicating with People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing in Hospital Settings, available for free download at <http://www.ada.gov/hospcombr.htm>.

Copies of discrimination against one as a patient with hearing loss may be made to the state Division on Civil Rights in the state where the patient resides. Also, one can file an ADA complaint with the Department of Justice. More information is available at the following link on the Department of Justice's ADA website.
http://www.ada.gov/filing_complaint.htm.

Other Resources:

The Hearing Loss Association of America – Sacramento Chapter has a free Hospital Kit you can download that contains a hospital planning guide, customizable information cards for what you need for effective communication, and a hospital poster to print out and attach to your bed or other location. The web link for these free items is on the left hand side of the HLAA Sacramento Chapter’s home page <http://www.hlasac.com/>

The Hearing Loss Association of America Lane County, Oregon has a different free Hospital Kit you can download at this link:
<http://hearinglosslane.org/how-to-make-your-own-hospital-kit/>.

Alternatively, different Hospital Kits are available for purchase from the Hearing Loss Association of America's Washington State and San Antonio chapters which have been selling them for some time. To view the contents of these Hospital Kits available for purchase please go to: <http://www.hearinglosshelp.com/articles/hospitalkits.htm>.

To learn more about assistive technology (devices and services), check out the Hearing Loss Association of America's Hearing Assistive Technology section on its website. The link to the section is <http://www.hearingloss.org/content/hearing-assistive-technology>.



Richard Herring retired in 2000 from New Jersey state government services as the division director of the Division of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Upon retirement, he was honored by the Senate and General Assembly of New Jersey through a signed Joint Legislative Resolution for his outstanding tenure of public service.

In 1993, Richard received a Special Friend Of Persons With Hearing Loss award presented by Howard E. “Rocky” Stone, executive director of SHHH which is now known as the Hearing Loss Association of America.

To this day, Richard maintains that any auxiliary aid which affords equal accessibility to people with hearing loss is not only mandated by law, it is **ethically**, **morally**, and **logically** correct! He may be reached at Richard@hla-scc.com.



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Her highly-acclaimed training’s advise and educate public and private entities on methods that improve communication access for persons with hearing loss and people who have both vision and hearing loss.

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