



Canadian Hard of Hearing Association British Columbia Chapter

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Accessibility for Hard of Hearing Persons During the Coronavirus Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented situation impacting on everyone. For people who have a hearing loss, the impact of social distancing and the common use of face masks has created additional challenges. Typically, we need to be in close proximity to others and to read their lips so that we can communicate effectively. The good news is that there are solutions to our challenges as listed below.

Use of Face Masks

- Guidelines on use of face masks have been developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and professional associations.
[The use of protective masks - WHO](#)
[AEA Guidelines for Professional Hearing for COVID-19](#)
- Transparent face masks are also available and information about suppliers is available on the website using the search words “transparent surgical masks”.

Communication Alternatives

- Speak at a moderate rate and repeat oneself if asked. Exercise patience during communication.
- Try text interpretation of speech through cellphone apps or pen and paper.
- Employ text messaging or video apps with the captioning feature enabled where personal interaction is not possible.
- Use assistive listening devices; the speaker uses a transmitter and the hard of hearing person wears a receiver. The device has a range that allows for social distancing.

Captioning and Sign Language Interpreting for the Media

- Caption TV news and social media as this is essential for many hard of hearing persons.
- Provide public messages with sign language interpreting which is the main means of communication for some deaf and hard of hearing persons.

Kudos

We thank our media, health care and allied workers and everyone for doing their part to create a safer community while attending to the communication access needs for those of us with a hearing loss.

The British Columbia Chapter of the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association is a non-profit organization of individuals who have a hearing loss. CHHA BC and its branches are self-help organizations committed to creating awareness of the nature of hearing loss, accessibility needs and strategies for enhancing better hearing.

Ruth Warick, President, CHHA BC

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Canadian Hard of Hearing Association British Columbia Chapter

June 22, 2020

Dr. Bonnie Henry
Provincial Health Officer
Ministry of Health, Province of British Columbia

Re: Accessibility for Hard of Hearing Persons During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Dear Dr. Henry:

The coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented situation impacting on everyone. For people who have a hearing loss, the impact of social distancing and the common use of face masks have created additional challenges. Typically, we need to be in close proximity to others and to read their lips so that we can communicate effectively. Face masks that obscure or hide a portion of the face interfere with our ability to understand the other party and may have potential negative impacts on our health care through misunderstandings and lack of communication.

We recommend that health professionals wear clear masks and would urge your office to promote their use. You are in a unique position to influence the health care sector on this matter.

While the supply of clear masks meeting regulatory standards is inadequate, some steps are being taken to redress this issue. CHHA-BC is connected with other professionals who are endeavouring to develop a supply of made-in-Canada face masks. Attached is a press release from them: *Communication Accessibility in Isolation: The Invisible Factor*.

We are also supportive of efforts of the Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility in BC to promote use of a face shield. They have partnered with a local company to make shields available. Their audiologists use a face shield and lower their face mask when communication is impeded. Information is included on our attached list of resources.

We also urge health professionals to adopt the following communication alternatives

- Speak at a moderate rate and repeat oneself if asked. Exercise patience during communication.
- Try text interpretation of speech through cellphone apps or pen and paper.
- Employ text messaging or video apps with the captioning feature enabled where personal interaction is not possible. Google Meet is one example.
- Use assistive listening devices; the speaker uses a transmitter and the hard of hearing person wears a receiver. The device has a range that allows for social distancing.
- Arrange for the meeting to be captioned (contact us for more information).

We also want to take this opportunity to thank you and your team for your leadership and excellent work during the pandemic. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

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Sincerely yours,

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Letter to the Editor

May 20, 2020

Communication Accessibility in Isolation: The Invisible Factor

May 21st is Global Accessibility Awareness Day. Nowadays, most people are aware of the importance of mobility accessibility, but fewer are aware of the importance of communication accessibility for people with “invisible” disabilities such as hearing, vision or cognitive difficulties.

COVID-19 puts older adults at greater risk, especially those with health problems such as diabetes, chronic pulmonary diseases and heart conditions. What we have not yet realized fully is the invisible factor for those with hearing, vision and/or cognitive impairments. By 75 years of age, half of Canadians have hearing impairments; by 85, half have both hearing and vision impairments. Those with sensory loss are also more likely to have cognitive impairment. It is common for residents in long-term care to have a combination of hearing, vision and cognitive impairments. In other words, those who are at the greatest risk for COVID-19 may also be those with the greatest risk for isolation because of their need for communication accessibility.

Communication challenges have escalated as COVID-19 has altered the ways in which people interact socially because of the need for distancing and wearing masks. People cannot touch or hug. It is impossible to see a face and difficult to hear the emotion in a voice or the words being spoken through a mask. Hearing aids and glasses are not always used when people need healthcare, whether in an ambulance, the ER, or ICU, when receiving palliative care, or even having an elective surgery. While visiting is restricted, people with communication difficulties are often alone when health care decisions are made. The best health care cannot be provided without communication accessibility.

We will all need to find new solutions for communication accessibility as we adapt to the extremely challenging stresses of the pandemic. Hopefully, we will also learn some useful lessons that will improve communication accessibility into a future after COVID-19.

Organizations of people living with hearing, vision and cognitive disabilities, associations of specialized professionals working with them, manufacturing companies, and researchers studying healthy aging are working to find new made-in-Canada solutions. For example, some innovative people who are hard of hearing and audiologists have been making their own do-it-yourself masks with a clear panel and some are using clear face shields so that people can lip-read.

Researchers in the Sensory-Cognitive team of the Canadian Consortium on Neurodegeneration in Aging are pursuing collaborations with industry to produce medical-grade PPE options to improve communication accessibility in healthcare settings. Canadian clinicians who work with individuals who have sensory and cognitive impairments are developing ways to improve clinician-patient communication in a time of physical distancing, including telehealth. Other solutions to improve communication accessibility include the use of video conferencing with personal amplifiers and captioning or speech-to-text apps to help people see and hear better. Communication accessibility for some individuals may require other more specialized technologies or the use of sign language interpreters. But for everyone, simple, tried, tested and true communication tips may be very helpful, including patience, clear and slow speech, good lighting, minimal background noise, taking time to confirm that people understand, and including others who can facilitate

communication and help to recall conversations later. We are looking for new ideas and solutions to overcome the invisible factor (ccnateam17.ca).

Everyone can benefit if we all become more aware of the importance of the senses and communication for overcoming isolation. Let's make a visible difference!

Kathleen Pichora-Fuller, Professor, Psychology, University of

Toronto Members of CCNA Team 17:

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Marilyn Reed, Audiology Practice Advisor, Baycrest, Toronto

Grace Shyng, Audiologist and Special Advisor, Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility, Vancouver

Christopher Sutton, CEO, Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility, Vancouver

Lyn Turkstra, Professor, School of Rehabilitation Science, McMaster University, Hamilton

Ruth Warick, President, International Federation of Hard of Hearing People and BC Chapter, Canadian Hard of Hearing Association

Attachment Two : Resources on Clear Face Masks

“Communication Accessibility in Isolation: The Invisible Factor” A Canadian consortium working with manufacturers in Canada to produce made-in-Canada clear face masks. Published in CHHA BC’s Hearing *Loop* magazine <https://chha-bc.org/loop-newsletter>

Face Shields essential for communication and Tinkerine Face shields, pages 7 and 8 , June issue of the CHHA-BC *Loop* publication. <https://chha-bc.org/loop-newsletter>

“ASHA Urges CDC to Emphasize Need for Clear Face Masks for the Hearing Impaired.” (The Hearing Review article from June 9, 2020)
https://www.hearingreview.com/inside-hearing/organizations/face-masks?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_term=HR+Today+Jun+2020&campaign_type=newsletter ASHA letter can be found at: <https://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/ASHA-Letter-to-CDC-About-Face-Masks-060820.pdf>

SOURCES OF MASKS

The Communicator (See-Through Surgical Mask): This mask costs \$60 US for a box of 40. Currently, out of stock but planning to have more available in July. It is a see-through medical mask approved by the FDA and started being used in hospitals in 2017. <https://safenclear.com/> Note: an interim order for their importation to Canada has been approved but SAC is currently investigating if these masks meet surgical grade standards for protection against droplets due to a disclaimer on the Clearmask LLC website they have the following disclaimer:

“DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, THE CLEARMASK™ IS CURRENTLY AVAILABLE FOR USE IN HOSPITALS AND BY HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS WITHOUT OBJECTION FROM THE FDA. THE CLEARMASK™ IS A FACE MASK THAT MAY BE USED WHEN FDA -CLEARED MASKS ARE UNAVAILABLE. PER THE FDA, USE OF THESE MASKS IN A SURGICAL SETTING, OR WHERE SIGNIFICANT EXPOSURE TO LIQUID BODILY OR OTHER HAZARDOUS FLUIDS MAY BE EXPECTED, IS NOT RECOMMENDED.”

HMCARE has developed a transparent mask in Switzerland and the company plans to start selling them in 2021 directly to medical professionals. It is planning to pursue European certification and eventually will pursue FDA approval. <https://hmcare.ch/>. Or go to <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/sci-tech/swiss-develop-first-see-through-mask/45824518> Also see more information in Popular Mechanics, June 10, 2020 <https://hearinglosscentralma.files.wordpress.com/2020/06/transparent-face-mask- -future-of-surgical-face-masks-1-4-1.pdf>



Canadian Hard of Hearing Association British Columbia Chapter

September 22, 2020

Honourable Adrian Dix
Minister of Health, Province of British Columbia

Re: Accessibility for Hard of Hearing Persons During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Dear Minister Dix:

The coronavirus pandemic has negatively affected communication access for persons who are hard of hearing due to social distancing and the use of face masks. Face masks that obscure or hide a portion of the face interfere with our ability to understand the other party and may have potential negative impacts on our health care through misunderstandings and lack of communication.

Our Association is writing to request the support of your Ministry in recommending and promoting the use of clear face masks by health professionals. You are in a unique position to influence the health care sector on this matter. We also urge your Ministry to promote the use of clear masks by the general public.

There are several providers of clear face masks that are of non-medical grade; we have listed those in contact with us on the home page of our website www.chha-bc.org. Unfortunately, the supply of clear masks meeting regulatory medical standards is inadequate. CHHA-BC is connected with professionals who are endeavouring to develop a supply of made-in-Canada face masks, and we are here to work with you to resolve this critical need.

We would also suggest your consideration for flexibility regarding type of masks used in health settings such as audiology clinics in non-hospital settings. We are aware that some clinics have adopted clear non-medical masks or face shields when an audiologist or speech therapist is meeting with a client.

Finally, we recognize that a variety of alternatives to communication is necessary and we appreciate the support of your Ministry for the following:

- Use of assistive listening devices that enable physical distancing.
- Ensure that video and other media are captioned
- Use internet platforms that have automated captions
- Use professional captioning for meetings and large events

We are happy to work with you in developing promotional materials about access requirements for hard of hearing persons. We also want to take this opportunity to thank you for your leadership and excellent work during the pandemic. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

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Sincerely yours,

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Canadian Hard of Hearing Association British Columbia Chapter

September 22, 2020

Honourable Rob Fleming
Minister of Education, Province of British Columbia

Re: Accessibility for Hard of Hearing Persons During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Dear Minister Fleming:

The coronavirus pandemic has negatively affected communication access for persons who are hard of hearing due to social distancing and the use of face masks. Face masks that obscure or hide a portion of the face interfere with our ability to understand the other party and may have potential negative impacts on our health care through misunderstandings and lack of communication.

Our Association is writing to request that your Ministry recommend that clear masks be used in place of covered masks in educational settings involving teachers and students who are hard of hearing.

It is particularly important for a student who is hard of hearing to be able to read visual cues from others to understand their speech. When speech reading becomes inaccessible due to non-clear masks, the student's learning and academic potential may be compromised. It is also necessary for teachers who are hard of hearing to read the lips of students, school staff, and parents, which can be possible through clear masks or face shields.

There are several providers of clear face masks that are of non-medical grade; we have listed those in contact with us on the home page of our website www.chha-bc.org.

We also recognize that a variety of alternatives to communication is necessary and appreciate the support of your Ministry for the following:

- Use assistive listening devices that enable physical distancing
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