

## Improving Communication with Deaf and Hearing-Impaired Patients

### Situation

- Hearing loss is a leading cause of poor communication in hospitals and is a health care quality and safety issue:
  - ✓ People with hearing loss have higher rates of hospitalization than their peers with no hearing loss.<sup>1,2</sup>
  - ✓ In the hospital setting, sensory impairment places patients at risk for delirium, with the consequent risks of increased length of stay, increased duration of mechanical ventilation, and in-hospital mortality.<sup>3</sup>
  - ✓ Patients with impaired communication report poorer health care outcomes and are substantially more likely to experience a preventable adverse event than those without impaired communication.<sup>4,5</sup>
  - ✓ 30-day readmission rates for hearing impaired patients has been reported at 32% and 44% greater than the rates for patients without hearing loss.<sup>2,4,5</sup>
- Though deafness has a higher prevalence than asthma, heart disease, or diabetes, deaf people experience persistent health inequalities with poorer experiences and outcomes in disease prevention and management.<sup>6</sup>

## Improving Communication with Deaf and Hearing-Impaired Patients

### Background

- Nearly 1% of US residents experience severe (>60 dB) or profound (>80 dB) bilateral hearing loss.<sup>7</sup>
- Almost two-thirds of people aged 70 and older have hearing loss and struggle to understand speech due to age-related hearing loss (ARHL).<sup>2,7,8</sup>
- Patient reported impact of this communication difficulty include<sup>9</sup>:
  - ✓ Misunderstandings of what physicians and other medical staff said
  - ✓ Not receiving answers in a way they could understand
  - ✓ Inability to get the information they require
  - ✓ Not feeling fully involved in decision making about care
- Older adults with hearing loss identify the following as the causes of ineffective communication<sup>10</sup>:
  - ✓ Patients' general mishearing
  - ✓ Healthcare workers' lack of awareness of ARHL
  - ✓ Healthcare workers' use of medical terminology
- The Americans with Disabilities Act and the Affordable Care Act mandate that U.S. hospitals must ensure patients with hearing impairment are able to communicate with medical staff.<sup>11,12</sup>

## Improving Communication with Deaf and Hearing-Impaired Patients

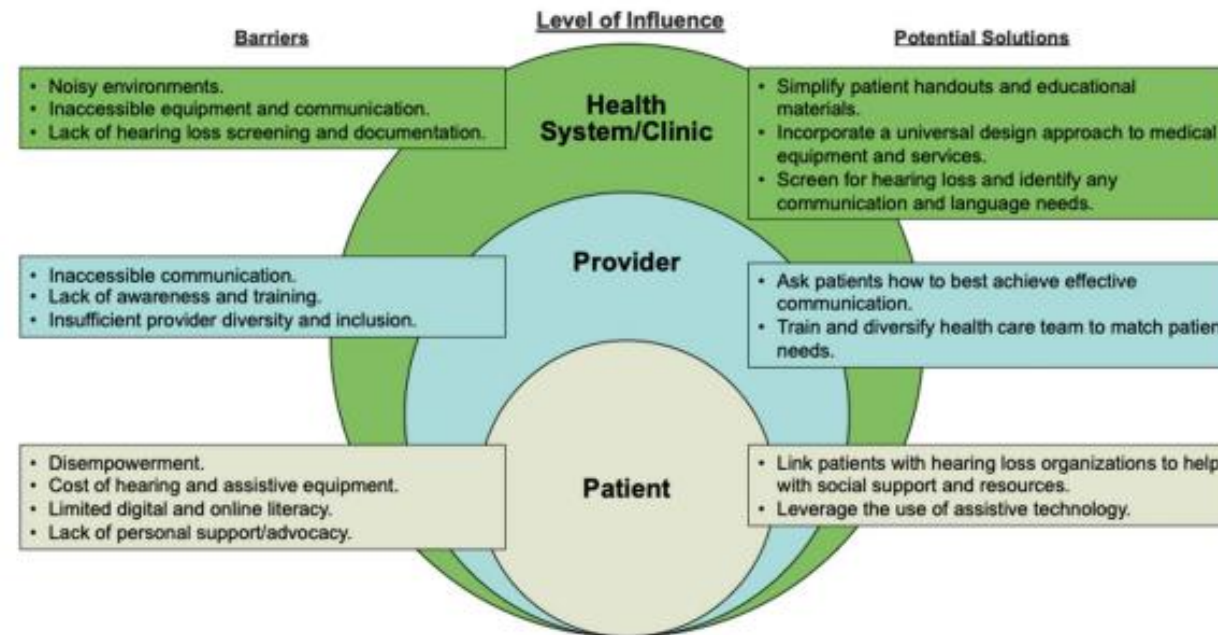
### Assessment

- Hearing loss globally affects health and health care and though not uncommon is largely overlooked, resulting in significant inequities and adverse outcomes for patients with hearing loss.<sup>13, 14</sup>
- Reframing health care to proactively meet the needs of patients with hearing loss is both attainable and necessary.<sup>14</sup>
- Numerous resources are available to inform health clinics/systems, health care providers, and patients of actionable steps to take to mitigate the missed communications arising from a patient being deaf or hearing-impaired.<sup>12,14,15</sup>

## Improving Communication With Deaf and Hearing-Impaired Patients

### Assessment

Health system-, provider, and patient-level opportunities and strategies to address the needs of patients with hearing loss



*From: Reframing Our Health Care System for Patients with Hearing Loss<sup>14</sup>*

## Improving Communication With Deaf and Hearing-Impaired Patients

### Recommendation

### Actionable Steps for Health Clinics/Systems

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#### Recommendation

- Standardize screening for hearing loss and any related communication and language needs.
- Incorporate a universal design approach to medical equipment and services to reduce the need for last minute adaptation or inability to provide accommodation for patients with specific needs.
- Simplify patient handouts and educational materials using health literacy principles.

#### Implementation

- Display hearing loss related communication needs in a visible area of the patients' chart
  - Create alerts to call American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters if applicable
  - Use sound and visual alerts (e.g., flashing light door alerts to notify patients when someone knocks on the door)
  - Provide hearing and communication assistive devices (e.g., pocket talkers, Video Remote Interpreting)
  - Use plain language
  - Incorporate pictures/graphics
  - Optimize layouts and guides
  - Provide patient educational videos with captions and availability in ASL
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*From: Reframing Our Health Care System for Patients with Hearing Loss<sup>14</sup>*

## Improving Communication With Deaf and Hearing-Impaired Patients

### Recommendation

### Actionable Steps for Health Care Providers

Recommendation	Implementation
Routinely screen for hearing loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask patients, "Do you think you have hearing loss?"</li> <li>• Refer to audiology for further testing if necessary</li> <li>• Assess patient communication needs and document in chart</li> </ul>
Ask patients with hearing loss how to best achieve effective communication	
Document preferred communication strategy in the medical record	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Update patients storyboard in the electronic medical record, if available. Alternatively, document preferred communication strategy in note or add to problem list</li> <li>• Ensure documentation is clear and accessible to other members of the care team</li> </ul>
Make appropriate accommodations, including ASL interpreters, communication access real time translation (CART), or other aids including personal sound amplification products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be aware of legal mandates around effective communication</li> <li>• Implement clinic based protocols to ensure accommodations are provided upon request</li> </ul>
Optimize patient rooming environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimize background noise</li> <li>• Exam rooms should be well lit, without any visual obstacles (e.g., laptop) obstructing the providers face or lips</li> </ul>
Directly engage patient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speak clearly, at a normal pace</li> <li>• Wear a clear or transparent face mask to facilitate lipreading and recognition of facial cues</li> </ul>
Check patient comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use teach back or teach to goal method</li> <li>• Simplify patient educational materials using health literacy principles</li> </ul>

*From: Reframing Our Health Care System for Patients with Hearing Loss<sup>14</sup>*

## Improving Communication With Deaf and Hearing-Impaired Patients

### Recommendation

### Actionable Steps for Patients

Recommendation	Implementation
<p>Encourage networking with hearing loss organizations to help with patient empowerment</p> <p>Leverage the use of assistive technology to address some of their communication needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• List hearing loss organizations and helpful resources designed for patients and consumers with hearing loss</li> <li>• Display key assistive technologies that are adoptable by those with hearing loss</li> <li>• Inform upcoming technology changes, including those by the Over-the-Counter Hearing Aid Act</li> </ul>

*From: Reframing Our Health Care System for Patients with Hearing Loss<sup>14</sup>*

Recommendation	Improving Communication With Deaf and Hearing-Impaired Patients	Yes	No	What action is needed?
	<p>Do you routinely screen your patients for hearing loss and any related communication and language needs? <i>See <a href="#">Reframing Our Health Care System for Patients With Hearing Loss</a><sup>14</sup></i></p>			
	<p>Do you ask patients how to best communicate with them and then document the information in their chart in a readily accessible location? <i>See <a href="#">Reframing Our Health Care System for Patients With Hearing Loss</a><sup>14</sup></i></p>			
	<p>Do you provide individual Communication Access Plan (CAP) forms to patients to encourage their development of a personal CAP to share with their healthcare team? <i>See <a href="#">Guide for Effective Communication in Health Care</a>.<sup>15</sup></i></p>			
	<p>Has your organization considered developing a Communication Access Plan which would include the following steps:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Needs Assessment</li> <li>2. Provision and Types of Services</li> <li>3. Training</li> <li>4. Evaluation</li> </ol> <p><i>See <a href="#">Improving Communication Access for Individuals Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing</a><sup>16</sup></i></p>			



Recommendation	Improving Communication With Deaf and Hearing-Impaired Patients	Yes	No	What action is needed?
	<p>Have you considered potential barriers for deaf and hearing-impaired patients at each point of contact in your organization (i.e., appointment scheduling, security/information desk, reception, examination room, pharmacy)? Have you identified what auxiliary aids or reasonable accommodations could help address those barriers?</p> <p>See <a href="#">Improving Communication Access for Individuals Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing</a><sup>16</sup></p>			
	<p>Is the written educational material provided to your patients written in plain language at a sixth grade or lower reading level? Does it incorporate pictures and/or graphics to help explain the information provided?</p> <p>See <b>Reframing Our Health Care System for Patients With Hearing Loss</b><sup>14</sup></p>			
	<p>Do your patient education videos include captioning and/or graphics?</p> <p>See <b>Reframing Our Health Care System for Patients With Hearing Loss</b><sup>14</sup></p>			

Recommendation	Improving Communication With Deaf and Hearing-Impaired Patients	Yes	No	What action is needed?
	<p>Do you optimize the patient rooming environment by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimizing background noise</li> <li>• Having exam rooms well lit without any visual obstacles obstructing the provider’s face or lips</li> <li>• Utilizing communication boards/signage</li> <li>• Incorporating visual, auditory, and tactile alerts (e.g. flashing light door alerts to notify someone is knocking at their hospital door) See <i>Bridging communication gaps with the deaf</i><sup>12</sup> and <i>Reframing our health care system for patients with hearing loss</i><sup>14</sup></li> </ul>			
	<p>Do you provide assistive devices in the Clinic, Inpatient and ED settings? (e.g., pocket talkers, video remote interpreting) See <i>Time to take hearing loss seriously</i><sup>11</sup> and <a href="#">Improving Communication Access for Individuals Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing</a><sup>16</sup></p>			
	<p>Do you provide education/training to your staff and providers regarding how to recognize patients who are deaf or hard of hearing (e.g., patient speaks loudly, complains people are mumbling, often asks for statements or questions to be repeated, etc.) See <a href="#">Guide for Effective Communication in Health Care</a><sup>15</sup></p>			

Recommendation	Improving Communication With Deaf and Hearing-Impaired Patients	Yes	No	What action is needed?
	<p>Does your training include the following basic actions?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin the conversation by getting the person’s attention</li> <li>• Maintain eye contact with the patient</li> <li>• Avoid standing or sitting in front of bright lights or windows</li> <li>• Make sure your face and mouth are clearly visible.</li> <li>• Speak clearly at a normal pace, avoiding exaggerated lip movements or shouting</li> <li>• Use facial expressions and gestures to help clarify your message. Point to where you are at on a form or computer screen or to appropriate visual aids.</li> <li>• Only one person speak at a time when in a group</li> <li>• Rephrase rather than repeat the same words and sentences when the patient does not understand what is being said</li> <li>• Inform the patient when you are changing topics (i.e., diagnosis, treatment, follow-up, medication)</li> <li>• Check for the patient’s comprehension by using teach back or teach to goal</li> <li>• Do not ask family members, friends or caregivers to facilitate communication</li> </ul> <p>See <i><b>Bridging Communication Gaps with the Deaf</b></i><sup>12</sup>, <a href="#"><i><b>Guide for Effective Communication in Health Care</b></i></a><sup>15</sup>, <a href="#"><i><b>Improving communication access for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing</b></i></a><sup>16</sup></p>			

Recommendation	Improving Communication With Deaf and Hearing-Impaired Patients	Yes	No	What action is needed?
	<p>Have you considered sharing videos recorded by deaf or hard of hearing persons with staff and providers so that they can better understand how to approach a deaf or hard of hearing patient when communicating with them? See <a href="#">A guide on how to communicate better with deaf people<sup>17</sup></a>, <a href="#">Tops tips for communicating with deaf patients<sup>18</sup></a>, and <a href="#">6 Tips – How to talk to a deaf/hoh person<sup>19</sup></a></p>			

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17. BBC The Social. A guide on how to communicate better with deaf people (video). June 2022. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Af-hdLgo4bU>
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## Additional Resources

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5. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. The SHARE Approach overcoming communication barriers with your patient: a reference guide for healthcare providers workshop curriculum: tool 3. April 2024. Available at: [www.ahrq.gov/shareddecisionmaking](http://www.ahrq.gov/shareddecisionmaking)