

# Tune Into Safety for Hearing-Impaired Patients

Mrs. S comes to a busy medical office with signs and symptoms of a urinary tract infection. While teaching her about her newly prescribed medications, her physician assistant (PA) realizes she hasn't heard any of the instructions. What should the PA do?

## Looking into hearing loss

Hearing loss, the most common sensory deficit in humans,<sup>1</sup> diminishes quality of life and impairs the ability to communicate in everyday life. An estimated 30 million Americans age 12 and over experience bilateral hearing loss, or about 12.7% of the U.S. population.<sup>3</sup> Researchers predict greater numbers of Americans with hearing loss as the population ages.<sup>3</sup> Cardenas-Valladolid et al. found that hearing-impaired older adults taking multiple medications had double the risk of nonadherence when compared with others without hearing loss.

## Legal concerns

Safe care depends on good communication between PAs and patients. Legally, PAs have an obligation to do whatever it takes to effectively communicate with patients who are hearing impaired.

Without good communication, patients and caregivers can encounter these barriers to safe patient care:

- Patients misunderstand important information.
- Informed consent for treatment isn't provided.
- Medication regimens aren't followed.<sup>5</sup>

Always rely on a trained language interpreter, if available, or an assistive device or strategy approved for use in your facility.

## Care strategies

First and most important, ask hearing-impaired patients for their preferred methods of communication.<sup>5</sup> In a clinic or outpatient setting, the message can be conveyed with posters, appointment screen messages, and flyers.<sup>6</sup>

In an inpatient facility, admission procedures include hearing assessments.<sup>7</sup> Ask how the patient prefers to communicate; for example, by lip reading, language interpreters, written information and notes, voice recognition software, or a combination.<sup>5,6</sup>

Encourage your hearing-impaired patients to wear hearing aids (if available) and learn sign and/or lip-reading strategies.<sup>6</sup> Be aware, however, that lip reading is inaccurate and shouldn't be relied upon as a communication vehicle.<sup>5</sup> PAs can take continuing-education classes that focus on the care of hearing-impaired patients.

Even when using a language interpreter, face your patient, position yourself on the same level, and make direct eye contact. Keep bright lights on you, not your patient. Speak directly to the patient, not into a computer screen, and avoid interrupting the patient. As much as possible, keep extraneous noise and distractions to a minimum.<sup>6,8</sup>

Speak clearly and distinctly, but not too slowly or in an exaggerated way. Never shout. Preface main conversation topics with your patient's name. Eliminate medical jargon whenever possible; use short words and short sentences. Talk about one topic at a time, and before changing topics, ask your patient to repeat to you what he or she understands. When misunderstandings occur, explain things in a different way rather than saying the same phrase over and over.<sup>8</sup>

Courteously and empathetically listen to your patient and watch the nonverbal responses for signs of misunderstanding. If the patient misunderstands something, correct him or her in a respectful way.

If using a technology-enhanced communication device, make sure you're thoroughly familiar with how it works and continuously evaluate its quality, usability, and effectiveness.

Put important information in patient handouts. Here's where voice recognition software (speech to text) can be very helpful. Clearly dictate words into the microphone, show the on-screen written transcript during your conversation and dictation, and give related printouts to your patient. With all written information you share, consider carefully the patient's literacy level and language skills.

If you work in a clinic or outpatient facility, encourage hearing-impaired patients to book and confirm appointments electronically through text messages, secured online website scheduling, or e-mail. Also, instead of calling hearing-impaired patients from the waiting room, use a visual call system display using their first name and last initial or walk over to them and escort them to the exam room. Don't violate patient privacy by speaking loudly within the hearing range of others.

Having patient safety strategies for specialty populations is important for all healthcare organizations. A well-written policy that can be used by managers and employees to respond to hearing impaired patients will help organizations function at their highest capacity to provide excellent patient care and customer service. Following these policies and documenting the care you provided may protect you from being named in a lawsuit.

## REFERENCES

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