

# Making Your Hearing Loss Visible

## Medical Communication Access Strategies for Patients with Hearing Loss

By Richard Herring and Valerie Stafford-Mallis

**A**re 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 article is 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 just by looking at you that you have a hearing loss. 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 providers who come into contact with you that you have a hearing loss. You must show them what you need in order to be able to effectively communicate. This means you must know your hearing loss and what enables 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

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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 ([giftofhearingfoundation.org](http://giftofhearingfoundation.org)).

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

### Medical Office Waiting Rooms

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 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 communication access symbol to affix to your 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 (give examples of what they are) in order to communicate effectively with my treatment team.
- I have been advised the following will be done with my assistive listening devices while I am incapacitated for safekeeping (then list what you have been told).
- I have hearing aids or cochlear implants which are costly to replace. The hospital is responsible for any damage, loss, or theft of the equipment. (Indicate value of replacement.)

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 an 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. 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

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 have a hearing loss and how it affects you.
5. In advance of your surgery or procedure, speak with the hospital patient representative or advocate requesting what specific assistive listening equipment you need. Explain the degree of your hearing loss.
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. Handwrite or make a note that a separate information sheet has been given to the health care provider with instructions that it be prominently displayed in your medical records. This document is the legal contract between you and the treatment provider.
8. Suggest that a prominent note be posted where you are 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, x-ray technician, pre-op nurse anesthesiologist...everybody! Request the nurses and/or doctors remove their masks when speaking to you if at all possible. Explain you must be able to see their lips 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 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**

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 lipreading. 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 lipread the nurses tending to them can request they wear those masks if the hospital has them. Find out beforehand.

### **Shortcomings/Discrimination**

Finally, if a patient experiences shortcomings in communication access or lack of sensitivity among hospital personnel or feelings of helplessness because of inability to hear well, he or she should write a letter with observations and ask that the hospital improve its protocol for patients with all degrees of hearing loss. A copy of this letter should 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 [ada.gov/hospcombr.htm](http://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 at [ada.gov/filing\\_complaint.htm](http://ada.gov/filing_complaint.htm).

To learn more about assistive technology (devices and services), check out Hearing Loss Association of America's Hearing Assistive Technology section on its website. Go to [hearingloss.org](http://hearingloss.org)>Hearing Help>Technology. **HLM**



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