

Communicating with Deaf and Hard of Hearing patients in hospital and healthcare settings during Covid-19

Communicating in a health setting, especially in a busy clinic or ward situation, can be difficult at the best of times. The recent Covid 19 pandemic and the necessity for many healthcare staff to wear face masks has made communication even more difficult, especially for those Deaf or Hard of Hearing patients who use lipreading to assist with communication.

There are two distinct groups of patients that can be described as Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

Members of the Deaf community describe themselves as culturally Deaf. This means that Irish Sign Language (ISL) is their first language. Although most Deaf people can understand some spoken and written English, most require communication in ISL for complex and important information. In most instances a sign language interpreter will be required for appointments, tests etc.

Another group of patients will typically be older people who have become deafened and are hard of hearing but are fluent in English and do not ISL. This vulnerable group are likely to be a majority of this cohort of patients, and while some will be using technology such as hearing aids, many will not be using any assistive technology.

Good communication between health professionals and patients is critical for high quality and safe healthcare – so what can healthcare staff do to address this?

General Communication tips

Ask the person how they wish to communicate in advance of the appointment. If they need an Irish Sign Language interpreter, please refer to the section on 'Working with an ISL/English interpreter.

- 1) PPE face masks have been shown to reduce speech clarity and combined with the loss of lip reading and visual cues they can make communication between healthcare staff and Deaf and Hard of Hearing patients extremely difficult. If it is possible do not use a facemask or use a plastic see through visor. Face the person and make sure they are looking at you before communicating.
- 2) Do not speak to the patient while moving.
- 3) Look directly at the person and make good eye contact while you are communicating.
- 4) Try to minimise background noise or move to a quiet area if possible.
- 5) If the person uses a hearing aid or listening device ensure that they are available and in use.
- 6) The person may be lip-reading and watching facial expressions, for that reason lighting on the speaker's face is important. Try not to stand with a light or window behind your head and don't cover your mouth with your hand. If you are not sure about the location, ask the person if it is okay.
- 7) Speak clearly and at a slightly slower pace, but don't shout or over-enunciate mouth movements as this will distort your lip patterns. Keep your head fairly still.
- 8) The person may want to communicate by note-writing, this will take a little longer, please be patient and respond by writing.
- 9) Be responsive in the conversation. You will support understanding if you use gestures, body language and facial expressions to communicate information, but don't be over dramatic. Try to remember to nod rather than saying 'hmmm'.
- 10) Refer to visual information (drawings, diagrams or photographs) during conversations.
- 11) Be prepared to repeat and rephrase information if necessary. Check the patient's understanding.