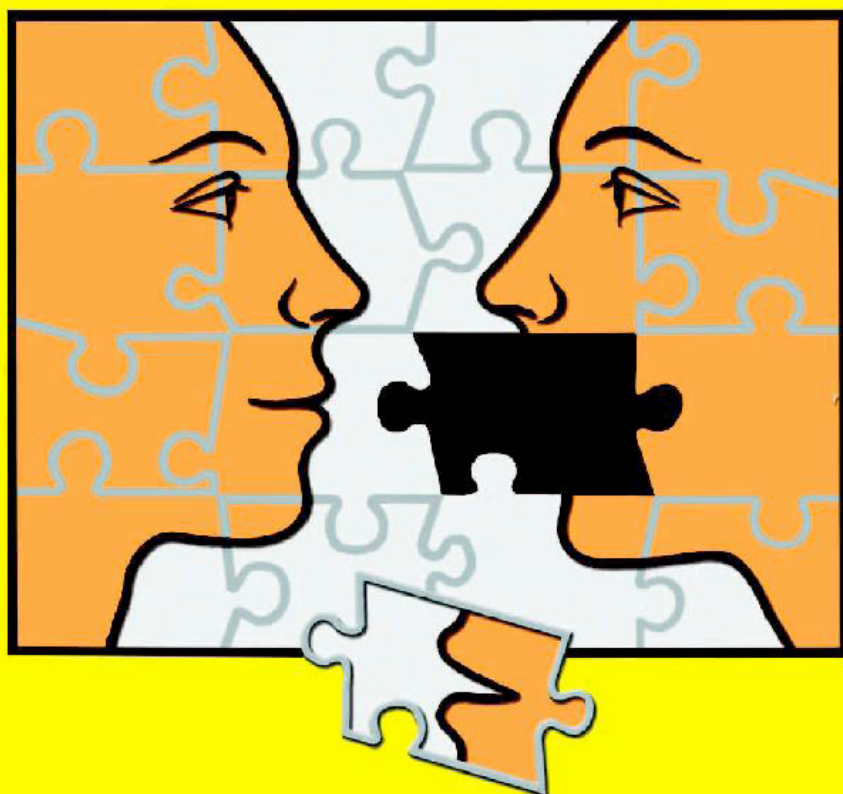


Focus on...

Communicating with Patients who have Speech/Language Difficulties

Guidance for Medical & Nursing staff



COMMUNICATION MATTERS



Introduction

In any medical or nursing setting you may come across a patient whose speech is difficult for you to understand. There might be times when you wonder whether the patient is able to fully understand what you are saying.

This leaflet relates to those people who have speech, language or communication difficulties due to conditions such as MND, MS, brain injury, stroke, cerebral palsy, learning disability, etc. This leaflet will give you some tips and guidelines to make communication easier - for the patient and for you.

This leaflet does not contain specific guidelines for communicating with patients who have English as an additional language or who are deaf, though some of the general tips may also be useful for these patients. Contact your local interpreting services for specific guidance and help.



General Tips

- **Conversations will take longer - if possible allocate a double appointment to patients with communication difficulties; the patient will be more relaxed, you will not feel rushed and you are more likely to gain a fuller case history, etc.**
- **Ask questions one at a time, and wait for the patient to reply to the first question before asking the next one or for clarification. This is harder than it seems.**
- **Look at the patient - this might seem obvious, but you can gain a lot of additional information which might help you understand what s/he is saying better.**
- **Speak to the patient even if s/he is accompanied by a relative or friend.**
- **Do not pretend to understand if you have not - people can spot this immediately and find it insulting. Ask people to repeat what they have said, ask them to say it in a different way, or ask if they can write it down. If all else fails ask a relative or care giver to interpret.**

Specific Tips

If you feel that the patient is having difficulties understanding what you are saying, then you might find these techniques helpful:

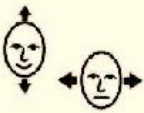
- **Speak in short, clear sentences.**
- **Use non-technical terms where possible.**
- **If the patient is able to read, write down key words on a piece of paper as you speak.**





- **Demonstrate what you are saying using gestures, pictures and props if appropriate:**
 - If you are talking about specific procedures, some people may find photographs of the procedures easier to understand. While it may be time consuming to create the photographs, they could be useful for others.
 - Similarly a simple diagram may explain a procedure much clearer than speech.
 - You could add specific gestures to what you are saying. For example, point with your thumb to the upper arm to indicate 'injection'.

If the patient has no speech, or speech that you find virtually impossible to understand, you might find these techniques helpful:



- **Ask questions requiring a 'yes' or 'no' answer.**
 - If the patient is unable to indicate yes and no in the usual manner, you might need to ask how the person indicates 'yes' and 'no'. Say to the patient: "Show me how you say YES. Show me how you say NO." Some techniques might be blinking once for 'yes' and twice for 'no', looking up for 'yes' and down for 'no', head nod/shake, thumbs up/down, pointing to 'yes'/'no' symbols, etc.



- **Ask if the patient could use an alternative method to back-up his/her speech.**
 - Can the patient write? If so, s/he may be able to use a pen and paper to support his/her speech.

- If the patient can spell but is physically unable to write then you could use an 'alphabet chart'. If the patient is unable to write, write the letters of the alphabet on a piece of paper and ask the patient to spell out what s/he is saying by pointing to the letters. If the patient cannot point to the letters on the alphabet board, you can point to letters in sequence, asking him/her to indicate when you reach the desired letter. It helps to have a pen and paper handy to write down the letters as they are dictated.

- Does the patient have a communication aid? If so, encourage him/her to use it.



What is a communication aid?

- A communication aid is a system or device used by people who have difficulties with speech and/or writing.
- These aids may be referred to as AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication).

AAC includes systems such as signing and gesture, picture or letter charts, electronic devices with speech output and computer software.



What do I do if a patient is admitted to hospital with a communication aid?

The first thing to remember is that the communication aid is a vital piece of equipment and it belongs to the patient - it is not a toy. It needs to be made available to the patient and not locked away for safe keeping. You do not need to know how the aid works, but you do need to make it available to the patient and listen to what s/he is saying via the aid.

Some communication aids speak with an electronic computer voice. Do not be afraid to say that you cannot understand the electronic voice – ask the patient to repeat; it can take a bit of time to tune in to the voice. Sometimes electronic voices are difficult to hear in a noisy environment, so ask patients if you can read the text on the screen and have them repeat the message.

What about security?

- Check that all equipment is clearly named in case it gets misplaced.
- Inform the person in charge of the ward about the aid.
- If an aid is being charged overnight check who is responsible for it.

What should I do if the aid does not work or I do not know what to do?

- Contact the family or care giver.
- Contact the Speech and Language Therapy department.



Communication Breakdown

Finally, if your patient appears to be trying to communicate something to you and you simply do not understand, try asking the following three questions:

- Can you indicate who we are talking about? List the main people involved in the patients care.
- Can you indicate where we are talking about? List the key events or places the patient has gone through.
- Are we talking about something that happened today, yesterday, or is going to happen?

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is the term used to describe methods of communication which can be used to supplement the more usual methods of speech and writing when these are impaired.

AAC may include unaided systems such as signing and gesture, as well as aided techniques ranging from picture charts to the most sophisticated computer technology currently available. AAC can be a way to help someone understand, as well as a means of expression.

Useful Resources



1. Pictographic Communication Resources

The Pictographic Communication Resources (PCR) binder of material has been developed with two groups in mind: health professionals (e.g., speech and language therapists, doctors, nurses, social workers, occupational therapists) and conversation partners working under the supervision of a health professional. The PCR is designed to facilitate discussions with aphasic people. The material is innovative in its combination of thematic organization, adult subject matter and depiction, and inclusion of complex topics.

Written by A Kagan, J Winckel, et al. (1996). Published by The Aphasia Centre, 73 Scarsdale Road, Toronto, ON M38 2R2, Canada
Email: aphasia@aphasia.ca Website: www.aphasia.ca
References and Resources: www.aphasia.ca/training/references.html

2. Web Essay: Overcoming Communication in Health Care Settings

This essay discusses communication barriers and breakdowns in medical settings and the many adverse consequences associated with them. It also provides information about how to get communication access tools to patients, as well as a list of different kinds of communication strategies that can help patients express themselves more effectively.

Written by Harvey Pressman, Emily Newman, and Juli Pearson. Please contact Harvey Pressman to receive a copy.
Email: presstoe@aol.com

3. On the Spot Resource Book

The On the Spot Resource Book was developed by Juli T. Pearson and Debbie McBride at Boulder Community Hospital for communication needs in the hospital setting; however, the tools can also be used in home care, outpatient care, acute rehabilitation, intensive care units, etc. This resource provides information about many kinds of communication tools, from low tech to high tech.

For more information, please contact AAC TechConnect
Website: www.aacTechConnect.com
Telephone: (866) 482-2279

4. Vidatak Website

Vidatak is the United States' premier provider of patient, family and care giver communication products and consultation services. Vidatak strives to provide innovative healthcare solutions for hospitals, long-term care facilities, surgical centers, nursing homes, rehabilitation facilities, and emergency departments.

For more information about Vidatak's products and services, please contact the company at:

Website: www.vidatak.com

VIDATAK, LLC

7985 Santa Monica Boulevard

Suite #109-265

Los Angeles, CA 90046-5112

Phone: 877 EZ BOARD

Fax: 734-477-6943

5. Central Coast Children's Foundation (CCCF), Inc. Website

This website provides information about assistive technology strategies, overcoming communication barriers in medical settings, and the Augmentative Communication World Network. It also lists several important communication resources published by CCCF, including occasional papers, resource guides, and web essays.

To access these resources, please visit the website listed below.

www.centralcoastchildrensfoundation.org

Email: presstoe@aol.com



Please contact the Central Coast Children's Foundation, Inc. for more information on this topic or to obtain information about other resources:

Central Coast Children's Foundation, Inc.

Harvey Pressman, Chair, USSAAC Health Care Communication Committee

1 Surf Way, #237

Monterey, CA 93940

Tel: (831) 649-3050

Fax: (831) 646-5428

Email: presstoe@aol.com

Website: www.centralcoastchildrensfoundation.org

Thanks to Communication Matters (ISAAC UK) for permission to use narrative content.

The symbols in this leaflet are illustrative rather than to provide symbol support for reading