

COVID 19 Pandemic: A New Burden on Communication in Elderly

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The ongoing pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), is undoubtedly the defining global health crisis and the greatest challenge the world has faced since the World War II. . Actually, this serious health problem mandates lockdown and certain protective measures. These includes social distancing, self-isolation measures as well as use of facemasks. All these measures have negative impact on communication. For example, wearing Facemasks can hinder proper communication as the sounds become muffled. However, it is considered one of the most protective measures as it guards against infection and keeps people safe. More than 50 countries mandate wearing masks in public.

Older people often have functional difficulties (hearing, vision, and even cognitive impairment). Those with hearing problems are more vulnerable to listening and communication problems due to strict protective measures against corona virus. These measures particularly facemasks deprive them from visual cues during communication. Additionally, following the physical distancing recommendation can make communication by sign language more difficult. Accordingly, elderly suffer listening difficulty and communication problems with subsequent social isolation problems and cognitive difficulty.

Clinical evaluation of patients attending the audiology clinic from June to December 2020 showed that 42% of patients attending the clinic were elderly patients. All of them complained from difficulty in communication even those who were using hearing aids. Their ages ranged from 65 up to 93 years. All of them reported struggling with listening after wearing the facemasks. Some of

them reported memory problems. They asked for hearing aid fitting immediately though some of them were refusing to use it in previously. Those who were using hearing aids before asked for re-adjustment of their own aids to improve their speech understanding and get better communication.

It is recommended to counsel the elderly and their families about the effect of facemasks and other protective measures on communication in everyday listening situations. They should be directed to depend on other cues and body language. Other supportive strategies include readjustment of their own aids to improve speech understanding with the facemasks is also mandatory. In addition providing tips for the patient's environment can help, including decreasing background noise, improving lighting, and ensuring providers effectively communicate via verbal and nonverbal ways such as speaking slowly or wearing a clear mask when permissible. Finally, use of digital technology such as telecommunication can be supportive for elderly during COVID pandemic.

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