

Opportunities for Audiology to Advance Inter-professional Collaboration

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The National Academies of Practice Audiology Academy is comprised of audiologists from the clinical, educational, research, and administrative sectors, including a variety of work settings and locations throughout the country. Practitioners make up the largest proportion of Audiology Academy Fellow and Professional members. As a health profession, Audiology is responsible for the evaluation and treatment of individuals with hearing loss, tinnitus, and balance problems across all ages, including newborns, infants, and children through older adults. Most clinical consults are generated by otolaryngology, pediatrics, geriatrics, neurology, physical therapy, primary care and other providers. In turn, Audiology Clinics refer patients to primary care and family practice, pediatrics, otolaryngology, neurology and speech-language pathology for evaluation and treatment. Similarly, audiologists receive educational referrals from multidisciplinary teams that include psychology, social work, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, and deaf education. Our internal goals within the Audiology Academy are to advance these interprofessional relationships, continue our support of Public Policy with an emphasis on interprofessional collaboration, develop and disseminate Public Health messages to educate patients and providers about benefits of interprofessional collaboration with Audiology, and continue our special projects and initiatives.

Public Policy

Audiologists are represented in the areas of public policy, advocacy and government relations through various national organizations such as the American Academy of Audiology (AAA), Academy of Doctors of Audiology (ADA), American Speech-Language and Hearing Association (ASHA), state academies and organizations, and state licensing boards. The AAA, ADA, and ASHA have worked together to support H.R. 4056, the Medicare Audiologist Access and Services Act. This legislation is intended to remove the physician referral requirement for Medicare patients to improve access to hearing health care delivered by audiologists, as is available to individuals covered by other payers. It also aims to grant audiologists practitioner status and allow them to provide and be reimbursed for diagnostic and treatment services that they are currently permitted to perform under their state scope of practice.

Audiology

The profession of Audiology allows professionals to care for the whole patient and manage the auditory-vestibular issues of each individual in the context of the entire person and their specific medical history. There is a high degree of cooperation with patients and their family members to diminish and remediate the social-emotional impact of hearing loss (e.g., social withdrawal and isolation, impact of hearing loss on personal and work-related interactions because of difficulty hearing, listening and communication settings), in addition to the various treatment options that exist for hearing loss. Some audiologists are “cradle to grave” practitioners; in that, within a single practice setting, and even as a solo provider, audiologists may deliver care for a newborn and senior in the same day.

The scope of practice of an audiologist encompasses the evaluation and management of hearing and balance related disorders. There are numerous coexisting morbidities associated with hearing loss and vestibular disorders (e.g., diabetes, cardiovascular disorders, kidney dysfunction, cognitive decline), which creates opportunities to improve patient outcomes through interprofessional collaboration with a

number of healthcare professionals. Collaboration for individuals who receive an audiologic evaluation, management, and rehabilitation often includes the following specialties and sub-specialties: primary care and family medicine, pediatrics, otolaryngology, neuro-otology, neurology, occupational health and preventive medicine, pharmacology, nursing, speech-language pathology, physical therapy, social work, psychology, dentistry, neonatal intensive care teams and educational and medical multidisciplinary care teams.

In the area of balance disorders, audiologists are trained to identify vestibular problems that call for referral and management, which can facilitate early identification, diagnosis, and management of vestibular disorders and decrease risk for falls. One survey reported that 50% of vestibular patients reported that it took five months or longer to obtain an accurate diagnosis for their condition when all healthcare providers were considered, which contributes to the rising cost of healthcare. Using Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) data, another report indicated that audiologists have the potential to produce a savings of almost \$10M per year in Medicare charges; presumably our expertise more promptly places patients on the preferred clinical pathway. Importantly, reduction of time to diagnosis not only reduces healthcare costs but decreases financial burden for patients, while improving their quality of life. In partnership with the NAP and its Academies, Audiology is in an advantageous position to contribute to the advancement of Inter-professional education, practice, and collaboration in the interest of improving outcomes for individuals impacted by hearing or balance dysfunction.