

## **Communication Challenges During Covid-19: Team effort helps Baycrest clients to communicate remotely with families and physicians**

Marilyn Reed, May 2020

Communication with loved ones is essential to well-being and quality of life. Older adults living in Long Term Care depend on visits from family and friends to brighten their days, so imagine what it must be like when those visits are suddenly cut off, especially in a time of fear and anxiety caused by a pandemic. In trying to ensure that contact with loved ones is maintained, Baycrest initiated a 'virtual visiting' program where staff facilitate video calls via Face Time, What's App or Zoom so that residents and patients can see their loved ones as well as talk to them.

While this program brings a great deal of comfort and relief to families as well as their loved ones in care, many of the clients have communication challenges including hearing loss, making conversations over cell phones and tablets difficult, even with video calls. Adding to this difficulty, the use of masks by staff prevents clients with hearing loss being able to lip read and use visual cues.

Clinicians who work with individuals who have sensory and cognitive impairments are developing ways to improve clinician-patient communication in a time of physical distancing. The Audiology team, redeployed to facilitate the virtual 'e-visits', suggested using Pocket Talkers, simple personal amplifiers, to help clients with hearing loss who don't have hearing aids to hear better during video calls. The daughter of one resident was "devastated" that during her e-visits, her mom didn't seem to recognize her anymore and was uninterested in conversation. Since she has been wearing a Pocket Talker, staff have noticed a huge improvement in her ability to communicate and that she is much more responsive and engaged. Her daughter reported that their e-visits are much more enjoyable and they are able to have a conversation.

All of Audiology's loaner Pocket Talkers have been put to use and an additional forty purchased (along with protective headphone covers, of course!) so that one could be included in each of the virtual visiting kits used by staff facilitating the calls. This was so helpful that we began using them with our Telemedicine visits with off-site physicians. The Pocket Talkers aid residents' participation in their health care since the physicians are able to conduct assessments and discuss health concerns with them more effectively during Zoom or OTN calls.

Communication accessibility for some individuals may require other more specialized technologies such as captioning or speech-to-text apps to help people see and hear better, or the use of sign language interpreters. The Audiology team arranged for the download of the Ava voice-to-text app for an iPad used on the unit. Feedback from staff and residents has been positive as the use of the app has allowed

for increased ease of communication making care provision simpler and safer. Recreation therapists reported the app facilitated longer meaningful conversations in a more relaxed way improving social interaction and quality of life. Expanded availability of the Ava app has been recommended.

We are now turning our attention to obtaining clear masks; the requirement for staff to wear masks has added significantly to communication barriers for our residents, since lip reading cues are obscured.

While some manufacturers are rising to the challenge in the US, there is a need for Canadian-made solutions that can allow lip reading while remaining effective in meeting safety standards for infection control. It appears that mask-wearing will be with us for a long time, not just in hospitals and long term care, and there will likely be a continued demand for such a product in the future.

The ubiquitous use of masks necessitated by this pandemic has given us a glimpse into the world of the hard of hearing and shown us that being able to read lips and facial expressions helps all of us to stay socially connected in these times when we are unable to touch or hug.

The best health care cannot be provided without good communication. If there is a silver lining to this pandemic nightmare, it could be that it has raised awareness of the prevalence of hearing loss among older adult residents in long term care, the importance of hearing to communication, and how some simple solutions can make a big difference. Hopefully, we will learn some useful lessons that will improve communication accessibility into a future after COVID-19.