

Waiting Rooms

Why Does it Have to be So Hard?

By Dana Mulvany



Earlier this year, I happened to visit three waiting rooms of medical professionals in the same afternoon. Afterward, I wrote the following to some individuals and posted it on email lists for people with hearing loss.

Most important to know is the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 is a United States law which generally requires places of public accommodation, including the offices of medical professionals, to be accessible to people with disabilities, including hearing loss. For more information, see www.ada.gov.

Today, I noticed that the television in the waiting area of my general practitioner was finally showing closed captions (which I had requested to be turned on last year). Later, I waited to be seen at a separate office shared exclusively by ENTs and audiologists.

I found it extremely disturbing to realize that this waiting area was using a video/advertising system that was showing only uncaptioned videos.

Further, the waiting area had absolutely no magazines or other information for people with hearing loss—only large numbers of mainstream magazines such as *TV Guide*.

Frankly, I felt angry. I'm fed up with so many hearing health care providers being so oblivious about the need to address the communication or informational needs of their own patients with hearing loss in their waiting rooms.

More than 20 years after the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted, their waiting rooms could be models of communication access. Hearing health care providers ought to be taking the lead in helping their clients learn how to maximize communication access in all aspects of their lives. If not them, who?

It is extremely insensitive to show inaccessible videos in a waiting room that will clearly be used by a high number of people with hearing loss. Obviously, these waiting areas should accommodate and address the needs of people with hearing loss. Absolutely no videos should be shown if they aren't captioned.

My Wish List for Hearing Health Care Providers Waiting Rooms

- Display the magazines of consumer organizations for people with hearing loss, such as *Hearing Loss Magazine*.
- Provide information about state and federal resources for people with hearing loss, like adaptive telecommunications programs, rehabilitation programs, equipment loan programs, etc.
- Provide information about local resources, such as HLAA Chapter meetings and local demonstration centers of assistive technology.

Response

I received several interesting email responses, most of which focused on the problem of not knowing one's name was being called.

One HLAA member wrote:

When I was first starting to lose my hearing decades ago, I sought the medical advice of a prominent New York City, Park Avenue ENT, and it was in his waiting room that the receptionists became annoyed with people who did not respond to having their names called. I was new to hearing loss and had no coping skills (and didn't even know I wouldn't hear my name called); so these emotional scars run deep.

Another person responded:

I agree wholeheartedly. I went to an audiologist connected to a large hospital. In the large waiting room, during the hearing aid repair open-clinic time, when calling patients for their turn, a soft spoken person would come out and call a person's

name. Of course, no one could hear her. I went to the counter and asked several times if my name was called. (And complained about their system.) Ridiculous.

A veteran wrote:

I had an ENT appointment at the Little Rock, Department of Veterans Affairs. The audiology and ENT departments share a large rectangular waiting room. All the chairs faced the back wall with a large TV, loud enough to make conversation difficult—but not loud enough for me to understand. And, there were no captions, of course.

But worst of all—we had our backs to the receptionists' desks; we were facing the TV. So we were supposed to hear someone call our names from the rear over the sound of the loud TV without any visual cues? I had to ask the ENT clerk to please notify me when my name was called.

A fourth person with hearing loss wrote:

I can't count the times I've not heard my name called. Visiting the doctor or dentist can be more unpleasant than the reason I'm there. While other patients enjoy reading, I'm a nervous wreck always looking to see if I'm being called. It does help to let staff know who I am but often it slips by, or they forget, or an unknowing staff member does the beckoning.

Possible Solutions

I like the idea of a vibrating pager. If restaurants can afford to do this I would think the medical profession and other offices would as well. I love restaurants which have this.

Several people suggested that a television (in the waiting room of a hearing health care professional) should

be connected to an audio loop system and/or another assistive listening system, along with information and receivers to help educate people about the usefulness of assistive listening technology.

Conclusion

If waiting rooms are set up and managed in a way that is inaccessible to people with hearing loss, they are literally forced to suffer the negative fallout of that lack of access through no fault of their own.

The process of managing people with hearing loss in waiting rooms can be designed much more humanely and intelligently. Let's figure out how to do this. Let's discuss this in person and online with people locally and across the country about how to provide consistent, systemic excellence and caring in addressing communication needs.

Do you know about waiting rooms that are set up well to meet the communication needs of people with hearing loss? Do you have other ideas on how to address these issues? Perhaps together, we could publicize a variety of solutions and eventually share stories about waiting rooms that have become more accessible—and much more welcoming—to millions of people with hearing loss. **HLM**

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