



## Considerations for Students with Hearing Loss Entering the Health Profession

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At the present time, there are well over 100 persons in the health professions with a significant hearing loss. This includes physicians, dentists, veterinarians, nurses, psychologists and others. The degree of hearing loss varies among these individuals, but many have a profound loss. The fact that we have many individuals in many different fields is perhaps the best testimony that a significant hearing loss is not something that should prevent an individual from practicing his/her chosen field. However, there are several areas that need to be considered by anyone with significant hearing loss who is considering entering the health profession. I am speaking from my experience over the last 25 years as a physician, administrator of a large ambulatory health organization, and member of two medical school admissions committees.

### Communication Skills

In order to be successful in a health profession, it is imperative that one be able to communicate with the public at large. How this is done is less of an issue. In other words, it is less important whether one communicates by speaking, using an interpreter, or some other method, as long as one feels comfortable communicating with all types of individuals. During the training of a health care professional, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates that the school provide reasonable accommodation to enable a student with a hearing loss to get the information that they need. This includes the provision of interpreters (oral or sign). It is not enough to just use an interpreter, however. One needs to be able to extract information and to make whoever one is communicating with feel at ease. At the University of Michigan Medical School, students who are not native English speakers who are being considered for admission receive a communication proficiency test to ensure that they are comfortable with communication.

### Admissions Process

One needs to have competitive credentials. Many of the health professions are very competitive to get acceptance to. There are huge numbers of applicants and most of these schools have minimum requirements for grade point averages, standardized test scores, recommendations, and evidence of significant extra-curricular activities. Some also require research experience. It is not acceptable to state that one's grades are lower because of one's hearing loss or because one spent much time on extra-curricular activities; remember, health professionals have responsibility for the health of their patients and thus one needs to be able to learn the necessary material.

Moreover, many individuals with severe loss are not fluent in written English. This becomes a problem when they write their essay for the admissions committee. A poorly written essay will most likely destroy any chances of acceptance. Over the past few years, I have been asked by various deaf and hard of hearing students to critique their medical school application essays. Several of them were abysmally written, even though these persons communicated quite well in person. It is well worth the

time and effort to have others read and critique your essay, preferably doing this with multiple drafts before submitting to the admissions committee.

Many people ask whether they should be up front about their hearing loss in their application or wait until they have an interview. Most of us with experience in this would say be up front. Consider even making your hearing loss an asset, i.e., by emphasizing in your essay how you've overcome it and then elaborating on this in your interview. Many schools are looking for diversity in their student body; a d/Deaf student is certainly going to be unique.

Related to the preceding paragraphs, many health profession schools will conduct interviews of prospective students. During these interviews, it is important that the applicant with a significant hearing loss is able to carry on a conversation. As a general rule, most interviewers do not care about the specifics of the answer to their questions but rather are looking to see that the individual has thought about the issues and is able to effectively communicate their ideas. They will most likely ask how you plan to successfully learn the material and interact with patients. Be ready to answer this question. Also, do your research ahead of time, such as learning how many other people with hearing loss have successfully made it in your chosen field as well as what accommodations are available.

The last comment I'd like to mention regarding the admissions process is the issue of technical standards. Most medical schools have standards that require any student they admit to be able to perform certain activities, and require all students to sign a form stating they meet these requirements. These include the ability to gather information from patients, both from taking a history (i.e., asking multiple questions of the patient) as well as from conducting an exam. How one meets the requirements is usually not the issue. For example, if one communicates well with the public via interpreters and can demonstrate this, then that would be considered acceptable by many places. However, each school will interpret their standards differently.

## **Accommodations**

Once one gets into a health professional school, then he/she can consider what accommodations are needed. There are a large number of these, ranging from note taking services to FM loops connected to one's hearing aids to sign language interpreters. In addition, specific health professions accommodations such as amplified stethoscopes or oscilloscopes are also available.

The Association of Medical Professionals with Hearing Losses (AMPHL; <http://www.amphl.org/>) website has extensive discussion on the school years and what you might consider requesting. Remember, the ADA mandates reasonable accommodation. Many schools have indeed provided all the services listed so it is clearly doable.

I am currently a faculty member at the University of Michigan Medical School. I see patients 35-40% of the time; the remainder of my week is spent on educational, research and administrative activities. The University of Michigan has been very receptive to providing the accommodations I have asked for. They likewise do for our d/Deaf and hard of hearing students as there is an office specifically dedicated to students with disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, people with hearing loss can be a health care professional. To do so, one needs to be

comfortable communicating with the public, be competitive in school, and learn about the accessories available to help with the job.

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