THE CANADIAN HEARING SOCIETY
LA SOCIÉTÉ CANADIENNE DE L'OUÏE

The Canadian Hearing Society Position Paper on Discrimination and Audism

The Issue

Culturally Deaf, oral deaf, deafened, and hard of hearing Canadians continue to experience discrimination in the workplace and when accessing vital services that most Canadians take for granted such as education, employment, health care, and housing. Discrimination is a sad reality for all people with disabilities, and in the case of people who are culturally Deaf, oral deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing, such discrimination may also be rooted in *audism*, a key term that we describe in more detail below.

The Canadian Hearing Society (CHS) Position on the Issue

Discrimination in any form closes the door to equal opportunity, a fundamental right of Canadian citizenship and democracy itself. Culturally Deaf, oral deaf, deafened, and hard of hearing Canadians have the right to fair and equitable treatment, to participate equally in the workplace, and to communicate fully and freely with businesses, non-profit organizations and government. It is the position of CHS that both the public, private, voluntary and not for profit sectors be responsible for ensuring discrimination-free environments.

The Prevalence of Hearing Loss

Almost 25% of adult Canadians report having some hearing loss (CHS Awareness Survey 2002), although closer to 10% of people actually identify themselves as culturally Deaf, oral deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing.

The average age in Canada is 39 years; by 2030 it will be 45 years. In 2030, Canadians 65 years and older will represent 25% of the total population, nearly double their current 13% (Statistics Canada).

Hearing loss is the third most prevalent chronic condition in older adults and the most widespread disability (Fook 2000; Yueh 2003). Its prevalence rises with age. Reports indicate that more than 80% of patients over 85 have a hearing loss (Yueh 2003). Further, 46% of people aged 45-87 have hearing loss (Dalton 2003).

Couple these statistics with the fact that aging is the #1 cause of hearing loss, and the conclusion is clear that the incidence of hearing loss is poised to climb dramatically.

Terms Key to Understanding the Issue

Audism (Ô diz m) n. 1. The notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears. 2. A system of advantage based on hearing ability 3. A metaphysical orientation that links human identity with speech.

The first is the initial seed planted by Tom Humphries (1975). The second is adapted from Wellman's (1992) discussion of institutionalized audism. The third definition was presented at the Deaf Studies VI conference by Bahan and Bauman (2000).

Audism is a form of discrimination based on a person's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears, including the conveyance of beliefs that a hearing person or a deaf person who behaves in a manner more similar to a hearing person, in appearance, communication and language use, and/or function, is more intelligent, qualified, well-developed, and successful than

another individual who may be more culturally deaf and/or have a preference for the use of a sign language or a communication mode dissimilar to that used by hearing people.

Like all forms of discrimination, audism is grounded in misconception and misunderstanding: "…often disguised in sentiments of concern for safety, unawareness of accommodations or perceived undue financial hardship in providing accommodations." (Malkowski, 2003) "…the belief that life without hearing is futile and miserable…and that … deaf people should struggle to be as much like hearing people as possible." (Pelja, 1997).

Of course, discriminatory beliefs are one thing - discriminatory practices are quite another, and in more extreme forms, "like racism or sexism, audism judges, labels, and limits individuals on the basis of whether a person hears and speaks." (Humphries and Alcorn 1995:85). When discriminatory beliefs give rise to discriminatory actions, unfair limits and barriers are imposed.

Examples of this can be found in such statements such as: "You can't possibly get a university degree because you are deaf." "I can't hire you because you are hard of hearing." "It is not a safe environment for someone with a hearing loss." "I can't promote you to supervisor because of your hearing loss." Or "I can't rent this apartment to you, because you're deaf." It is also exemplified in a situation where one deaf or hard of hearing individual is offered a position or promotion, over an otherwise more qualified deaf or hard of hearing individual, on the basis how "hearing-like" the individual looks, acts and/or functions. Selecting a hearing person over an otherwise more qualified deaf or hard of hearing person, or denying a deaf person their rights solely because of a hearing loss are more explicit and discernible examples of discrimination. However, audism, as in the example of two deaf or hard of hearing people competing for the same job, often appears in more subtle forms, though the results are equally devastating for the individual and society as a whole.

The Rationale for CHS's Position

In addition to clear moral and ethical grounds, existing legislation, significant legal decisions and independent research reports support our position. In brief, they are as follows[1]:

<u>The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms [1982]:</u> The Charter is a bill of rights entrenched in the Constitution of Canada. The Charter protects the political and civil rights of all Canadians, and supercedes all provincial human rights codes.

<u>Canadian Human Rights Act [1985]:</u> This Act extends the laws of Canada to uphold the principle that "all individuals should have an opportunity equal with other individuals to make for themselves the lives that they are able and wish to have and to have their needs accommodated...without being hindered in or prevented from doing so by discriminatory practices based on...disability."

<u>Ontario Human Rights Commission's Disability & The Duty To Accommodate: Your Rights & Responsibilities 2007</u>

- *"Persons with disabilities face many kinds of barriers on a daily basis. These can be physical, attitudinal or systemic. It is more effective to identify and remove barriers*

[1] For links to these and other resources on accessibility and the duty to accommodate, please visit our website at http://www.chs.ca/

voluntarily rather than waiting to respond to individual accommodation requests or complaints."

- *"Keep in mind that barriers are not just physical. Taking steps to prevent "ableism"-attitudes in society that devalue and limit the potential of persons with disabilities-will help promote respect, dignity and the full participation of persons with disabilities in the life of the community."*
- *"The 'duty to accommodate' is the legal obligation that employers, unions, landlords and service providers have under the Code to meet the needs of persons with disabilities."*

Some of examples of accommodation include providing TTY, visual alarms and emergency notifications systems, and sign language interpreters or real-time captioning for persons who are deaf, deafened, and hard of hearing so they can participate fully.

Ontario Human Rights Commission's Policy and Guidelines on Racism and Racial Discrimination 2005] p. 13, which states: "*At the institutional or systemic level, racism is evident in organizational and government policies, practices and procedures and the 'normal way of doing things' which may directly or indirectly consciously or unwittingly, promote, sustain, or entrench differential advantage for some people and disadvantage for others."*

Ontario Human Rights Commission's Policy and Guidelines on Disability and the Duty to Accommodate [2000] The Ontario Human Rights Code explicitly states that everyone has the right to be free from discrimination. The Policy and Guidelines outline the details and give practical measures for workplaces, public transit, health services, restaurants, shops and housing to provide Ontarians with disabilities equal treatment and barrier free access.

Ontario Human Rights Code [1990] The Code protects Ontarians from discrimination based on disability or other characteristics (e.g. race, ancestry, family status, sexual orientation, etc.) and calls for a *"climate of understanding and mutual respect for the dignity and worth of each person so that each person feels a part of the community and able to contribute fully to the development and well-being of the community and the Province."*

Note that other provinces and territories have legislation, policy and/or guidelines on the duty to accommodate persons with disabilities that embody the principles of the Ontario Human Rights Code. For links to these sites please visit us at http://www.chs.ca.

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act [2005]: Passed unanimously in the Ontario Legislature, this Act commits the government of Ontario to create, implement and enforce standards of accessibility with respect to goods, services, facilities, accommodation, employment, buildings, structures and premises for the 16 per cent of Ontarians with disabilities, including people who are culturally Deaf, oral deaf, deafened, and hard of hearing.

Frequently Asked Questions

- *I've seen terms like ableism and attitudinal barrier in the press; what do these terms mean?*

  As we noted earlier, discrimination is a reality for all people with disabilities; ableism refers to discrimination (in belief or practice) based on a person's abilities, whether developmental, learning, physical, psychiatric or sensory.

  When discriminatory beliefs lead to discriminatory actions then it can be said that an attitudinal barrier has been imposed which, by definition, unfairly limits the opportunities

and options available to those being discriminated against. For example, research shows that serious attitudinal barriers exist in the expectations and behaviours of educators and employers regarding the capabilities and employability of culturally Deaf, oral deaf, deafened, and hard of hearing people that have resulted in the widespread under-education, under-employment and unemployment of thousands of Canadians with hearing loss.

- *I am an employer. Where can I find information about accessibility technology to ensure the safety of employees with hearing loss?*

  We encourage employers to explore and identify technology for employees and applicants who are Deaf or have hearing loss that would satisfy safety requirements/measures/regulations set by government, health and safety organizations, Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, and insurance companies. There are useful and practical online resources for employers at http://www.chs.ca/info/es/index.html and for medical professionals at http://www.amphl.org

- *I'm a manager and I'd like to help the people in my organization understand hearing loss better, and I'm also not sure what I can or should do to accommodate our employees or customers with hearing loss. Where do I turn?*

  We're here to help! The Canadian Hearing Society has a long history of working with both private and public organizations to build positive awareness around hearing loss in the workplace and design and implement customized accommodation strategies. We invite readers to download any of our many publications available free online at http://www.chs.ca (click on "Information" and follow the links), or to contact us to find out more about our awareness training as well as accommodation consultation services.

For more information please contact The Canadian Hearing Society to obtain a copy of this position paper, the CHS Diversity Policy -- which includes Access and Accommodation, ASL proficiency, Anti-Audism, Anti-Racism -- or any of our other policies. Phone: 1-877-347-3427, TTY 1-877-347-3429 and e-mail info@chs.ca or visit us on the web at http://www.chs.ca.

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