

The Ghost Field: Rethinking Awareness-raising in Audiology

It always frustrates me to see a puzzled expression appear on my conversation partner's face when I tell them what I am studying. Audiology is a strange and unfamiliar word to most people. Indeed, only a few short years ago, it was foreign to me too. The obscurity of the field is paradoxical, as audiology commonly ranks among the top-rated careers (Fabry, 2011). Nevertheless, unless hearing loss has affected a person directly (or someone close to them), it is unlikely that they will know what an audiologist is or does. I believe this can be changed, but it requires a fundamental shift in the way we approach self-promotion in our field. Public awareness of audiology can be improved by devising and employing a unified national campaign that brings cohesion and direction to current promotional efforts. Specifically, the campaign's focus must be on engaging students of audiology, raising awareness in high school and undergraduate students, and increasing national participation by exploiting social media networks in order to spread the word about and build buzz around the campaign.

Ironically, awareness of hearing loss may actually be on the rise. At least, Rex Banks, Chief Audiologist at the Canadian Hearing Society, thinks so. Mr. Banks believes a boost in hearing loss awareness could be attributed to recent increases in hearing aid advertisements and media attention in response to "the emerging tide of baby boomers" (private communication, 2013). The growing number of retail-style hearing aid dispensaries and the introduction of 'big-box' hearing clinics, such as Wal-Mart and Costco, may also be contributing factors. Even still, audiology as a profession remains obstinately obscure.

The obscurity of the profession is particularly troubling when one considers evidence indicating an impending shortage of audiologists in the near future (Nemes, 2002). The looming shortage is due to the confluence of two factors: a rapidly aging population that will require the services of more

audiologists and a flat output of graduates from audiology programs. Consequently, there is a need to increase the number of applicants to, and graduates of, Canadian audiology programs through raising awareness in potentially qualified candidates. Additionally, it is necessary to increase general public awareness of the services audiologists provide, as over three quarters of the people who could benefit from a hearing aid do not own one (Kochkin, 2005). Unfortunately, it appears we have fallen short in this regard.

There have been some satisfactory promotional efforts. The Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists (CASLPA) has dedicated May as Speech and Hearing Month; this annual nation-wide campaign is well organized and executed: each year it is themed around a particular focus, has its own dedicated website, and even its own mascot. While the 2013 campaign had some notable success, such as Conservative Member of Parliament, Chris Alexander, shining some light on the campaign in the House of Commons, overall, there appeared to be underwhelming participation. Only seven events in the campaign were registered online, just two of which had involvement from audiology, and only one of which had involvement from students (maymonth.ca/en/events). Sadly, these modest gains look outstanding when compared to the Canadian Academy of Audiology (CAA)'s National Audiology Week.

Do not be dismayed if you did not participate in National Audiology Week 2013; it appears even the CAA itself forgot about its annual campaign this year. Honestly, the 2013 campaign simply never occurred. At least, the CAA never announced or acknowledged it; not even so much as an email was sent out. As of late November 2013, the CAA website still read, "National Audiology Week 2012 is November 11 – 17". Without comment or statement, the website was then updated to state, "National Audiology Week 2014 is November 2 – 8". Canada's national academy appears to have somehow overlooked the 2013 awareness campaign. Furthermore, CAA's National Audiology Week Marketing

Toolkit states, “National Audiology Week is celebrated the third week of *October* each year”.

Understandably, there is some confusion surrounding when the campaign occurs, and why it was mysteriously absent in 2013. What is most remarkable, however, is not that this year’s campaign did not occur, but that no one even seemed to notice; this is the state of promotion in audiology as it stands—it is no wonder the public does not know audiology exists.

The community of audiologists in Canada is quite small relative to other health professions. For this reason, I propose that National Audiology Week become National Audiology Month and that it strategically coincide with the American Academy of Audiology (AAA)’s National Audiology Awareness Month, which occurs each year in October. Synchronizing Canadian audiology awareness efforts with the American campaign would allow the Canadian campaign to pack more punch, as Canadians and Americans share many media sources, such as television and radio stations. The strategy of aligning with the American campaign would follow in the same vein as the CASLPA’s Speech and Hearing Month and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)’s Better Hearing and Speech Month both sharing the month of May for their respective campaigns. Additionally, the month of October is also when the CAA holds their annual conference. The CAA conference would provide a perfect forum to discuss innovative promotional ideas and acknowledge creative initiatives in awareness-raising. Another benefit to making October National Audiology Month in Canada is that students of audiology could, as part of their course work, design and implement a unique and powerful campaign of their own.

Past promotional campaigns have failed to capitalize on motivating and engaging students of communication disorders programs to participate in raising awareness for their field. Students have a reputation for enthusiastically volunteering their time for good causes, so it is not a far stretch to think they would become involved with a campaign to promote their own profession, especially if it were

part of a course. Working an awareness-raising assignment into the syllabus of a professional practice course would also stress the importance of promoting the profession as a professional duty and set an excellent example for students. Future campaigns must continue to solicit the participation of professionals but must also mobilize students of the communication sciences to get involved.

Promoting the profession to students at the high school and undergraduate level is another means of spreading the word about the profession that is largely ignored. Year after year, the field of audiology loses exceptional candidates to other fields simply because audiology is not on the radar of many qualified students. I have known many people who dreamed as children of becoming physicians, engineers, and lawyers, but I have never met someone who aspired to be an audiologist from a young age. The average age a student decides to pursue dentistry is fourteen, while the average age someone decides to become an audiologist is twenty-one (Nemes, 2002). Conducting presentations on the profession in high schools and universities should be at the center of future national awareness campaigns in audiology. By advertising the profession to young people in the education system, we will attract more diverse and qualified candidates to audiology, thus improving the quality of future audiologists. Furthermore, by raising awareness in students we indirectly educate the public, as students will discuss the idea with friends, parents, teachers and family. A quick presentation to a morning assembly of students is an efficient and influential way to get the word out about the profession (as well as hearing loss) to many people simultaneously.

Another means of putting the profession on the radars of many students is by targeting academic advisors. Academic advisors must be made aware of the field; otherwise, they cannot suggest the career to qualified students. Hosting meetings for academic advisors featuring a quick 30-minute presentation on the field and what sort of students would make good candidates would be incredibly effective. Another simple approach is to target undergraduate programs that are not traditional streams

into audiology (e.g. music, psychology, engineering, etc.), advocating to have audiology placed on the list of jobs to consider after graduating from these fields.

Finally, social media must be the engine that drives the proposed awareness campaign. While print resources can be useful, they are expensive, time-consuming, and burdensome. All Canadian speech-language pathology and audiology programs have dedicated Facebook groups and many working-aged professionals are on Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn. Social media therefore represents a fast, simple, and free means of spreading the word about a campaign and soliciting creative ideas from students and professionals alike. Similar approaches have been the driving force behind the enormous success of awareness campaigns such as ‘Movember’, which raises awareness for prostate cancer.

I dream of the day where the word ‘audiology’ evokes a look of understanding and admiration rather than one of puzzlement; this goal can be achieved by creating a national campaign that engages students of audiology, targets high school and undergraduate students and exploits social media to create a momentous vehicle that provides cohesion and guidance to national efforts in raising awareness. In this way, audiology can gain the acknowledgement and appreciation it deserves amongst the public.

References

Fabry, D. (2011). Stress? What Stress? The audiology profession. *Audiology Today*, 23(4), 20-25.

Kochkin, S. (2005). MarkeTrak VII: Hearing loss population tops 31 million people. *Hear Rev*, 12(7), 16-29.

Lowder, K., & Price, D.R. (2002). Professional behaviour: it’s not an optional extra. *The Hearing Journal*, 55(10), 6.

Nemes, J. (2002). Fearing shortage of audiologists, profession seeks ways to entice students. *The Hearing Journal*, 55(6), 23-26.