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Implications of Wearing Masks for Non-Native English Speaking Providers and Patients

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Ms. Rehman is a non-native English speaking doctoral student in clinical psychology at Fielding Graduate University. Below, she discusses the potential for added challenges with the use of masks during the COVID-19 pandemic for providers and/or patients for whom English is not their first language. Her poster on this topic will be presented at the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (Division 9, SPSSI) poster session at the upcoming APA2021 virtual conference. –Ed.

There is clear evidence that wearing masks is an important intervention that reduces the likelihood of transmitting COVID-19 to others. Thus, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) highly recommends the use of masks during COVID-19 (CDC, 2020). However, the use of masks creates challenges to the provision of healthcare services. In guidelines for speech-language pathologists issued by the American Speech Language Hearing Association (ASHA), they review some of these challenges, including the possibility of increased difficulty understanding communication due to reduced intelligibility of the wearer’s speech and loss of visual cues for the listener (Using Masks for In-person Service Delivery During Covid-19: What to Consider, n.d.).

It is argued that the capacity to use lip-reading cues is particularly valuable in authenticating the acoustic signals. The lack of these cues slows the neural processing of auditory speech signals, reducing the quality of speech perception in both normal-hearing and clinical populations (Marler & Ditton, 2020). Goldin et al. (2020) found that hearing loss did have a significant impact on provider-patient communication during the coronavirus pandemic. Communication may also be impacted by patients’ reluctance to admit when they cannot understand a provider’s speech fully.

These limitations create very real challenges for providing optimal patient care. A recent study showed that when patients cannot understand the information given to them by their provider, they tend to guess instead of asking for clarification (Pamungkasih et al., 2019). In a survey of eleven New York City healthcare workers about challenges associated with providing medical care to limited English proficiency (LEP) patients with COVID-19, providers described struggling with broken communication and utilizing “hastily improvised stopgaps” to deliver treatment (Kaplan, 2020).

One unanswered question is how wearing masks impacts psychologists and neuropsychologists’ work when the provider, patient, or both are non-native English speakers. In the US, the Center for Immigration Studies reported that 67.3 million individuals speak a language other than English (Zeigler & Camarota, 2019). Derr (2016) examined mental health service use among immigrants in the US and found significant unmet needs and poor service utilization. Some of the reasons for this shortfall included limited English proficiency (LEP) and lack of knowledge about services. Additionally, living in a country where others do not speak one’s primary language is likely to increase psychological distress (Derr, 2016).

With an increased understanding of COVID-19, this disease’s neurological manifestations are becoming evident (Ellul et al., 2020). The quality of psychological and neuropsychological care depends on a provider’s ability to fully understand the patient and a patient’s ability to understand the provider’s communication. Clear communication also helps optimize a patient’s trust in the treatment process and enhances emotional engagement. Many non-native English speakers are at increased risk for COVID-19 due to socioeconomic conditions that necessitate their taking of jobs that require face-to-face interactions and make social distancing difficult (Clark et al., 2020). Thus, there is an immediate need for guidelines that address the provision of healthcare services by, and to, non-native English-speaking individuals while wearing masks to prevent added gaps in care for immigrant and refugee communities most at risk during the current coronavirus pandemic.

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