

LETTERS TO EDITOR

Dear Editor,

Perceptions of City Dwellers of Kolkata, India about Speech and Hearing Disabilities

Many perceptions about speech and hearing disabilities are culture-specific and need to be better understood. In Speech and Hearing colleges in India, most of the teaching which is of western origin and publication can lead to different perceptions; these could be misleading or may not give the true picture in many cases. For instance, traditional Indian systems of medicine like Ayurveda may prescribe remedies such as the application of oil in the ears, while western medical thought would be opposed to the idea. Culture-specific studies are needed for a better understanding and implementation of management strategies. In traditional societies the rehabilitation process begins primarily with family initiatives. The child or adult with hearing and speech disability is often brought to an Audiologist or a Speech-language Pathologist by the family. The family's perception, which is in turn influenced by social perceptions, plays a major role in accessing help, as well as in following the treatment prescribed for speech and hearing disorders.

The authors conducted a study to explore Kolkata city dwellers' perceptions about the causes and management of speech and hearing disabilities. While this kind of a survey helps to understand common perceptions and issues related to speech and hearing disabilities, and the facilities available in Kolkata, it also promotes the improvement of a service delivery model, both qualitatively and quantitatively, and gives feedback about the perception of Audiologist and Speech-language Pathologists as professionals.

A total of 104 candidates (64 males and 40 females) from various parts of Kolkata participated in the study. They ranged in age from 21 years to 52 years, and were in the mean age 36.5 years and SD: +/-8.6 years respectively.

A validated questionnaire was used. Of the 6 questions, there were 3 pertaining to hearing and 3 pertaining to speech and language disabilities.

The WHO estimates that 6 out of every 100 people have hearing impairment, while Indian surveys puts the figure at less than 1 person per 100. This study found that 97% of the people had come across a person with hearing impairment.

Only 14% of the study participants perceived hearing loss to be of environmental origin and attributed it to noise. A mere 5% of all participants referred persons with hearing impairment to rehabilitation organisations.

Majority (90%) of the participants acknowledged that they had come across persons with speech and language disorders. The data signifies that common people are more aware about hearing impairment than speech-language impairment.

Only 3.6% of the participants thought that environmental factors could be the possible cause of speech and language disorders. The majority (55%) considered biological factors to be responsible. This finding suggests that speech impairment is perceived to be a disease. Due to this perception, 41% referred persons with impairments to a hospital, and 5.8% recommended them to ENT specialists (ear, nose and throat professionals) even though they do not practice speech therapy. Only 10.6% favoured referral of clients to a Speech-language Pathologist, and no one considered an Audiologist in the case of hearing loss, although the majority of speech therapists in India practice audiology. Though 10.6 % of the surveyed population recognised speech pathology as an independent profession, they did not know about the role of an Audiologist.

From this data it would appear that speech-language pathology and audiology are not well-known professions in India, and a significant number of advertisements and awareness programmes are needed.

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