

# EMERGING ISSUES: SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGY AND AUDIOLOGY ASSISTANTS<sup>1</sup>

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Some of the core challenges in structuring discussion of audiology and speech-language pathology assistants by the Council are:

- 1) there is incredible variation among the states regarding the level of education of assistants; these standards are not likely to be influenced by the Council;
- 2) some states are not interested in the issue of speech-language pathology and audiology assistants; and
- 3) in one arena (i.e., Otologic Techs), we may not have any control over the outcomes.

Nevertheless, the consensus of those in attendance was that members from different states could learn from one another by describing successful strategies for working with speech-language pathology and audiology assistants. The discussion focused on what academic units can do, what the Council can do, and the feasibility of inviting assistant programs to join the Council.

## **Academic Units**

*Education of Assistants.* The State of California has considerable experience with assistants in 2-year programs. Many of the assistant programs, which are usually

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<sup>1</sup> Author's Note: This session was to engage the membership in a conversation about speech-language pathology and audiology assistants. As might be expected, the members attending the session needed no encouragement to join in a lively discussion of the issue. This summary focuses on the comments of the members who participated in the session. The appendix outlines the major points that were planned for the session.

housed in community colleges, were initially started by university faculty. Some 2-year assistant students appear to be using the associate degree as a career ladder even though their assistant coursework cannot be substituted for bachelor's degree coursework. In high density population areas, where there may eventually be large numbers of assistants, "bridge courses" for assistants, similar to those used to move LPNs to RNs, seemed feasible but in need of considerable vetting.

The consensus among the group was that assistants' education must clearly delineate their scope of practice as prescribed by the various states. It is particularly important when individuals with bachelor's degrees serve as assistants because their education generally involved the encouragement of independent thinking and critical analysis. In some states, assistants with bachelor's degrees must enroll in coursework concerned with the scope of practice of assistants as well as practicum experiences as an assistant. Undergraduate educators may consider including information about assistants and their scope of practice in their curricula to alert their graduates to potential role changes should they elect to become assistants.

*Education of Supervisors.* Speech-language pathologists and audiologists need to be educated regarding their supervisory responsibilities for assistants. Although the specifics differ in various states, assistants can only practice under the supervision of a professional. Academic programs should be offering coursework for current students and continuing education credits (courses or workshops) for professionals (i.e., practicing audiologists and speech-language pathologists) to ensure that all professionals are aware (a) that supervision for assistants is within their scope of practice and (b) that supervision of assistants differs from supervision of bachelor's and

master's degree students. Moreover, current students and professionals should be provided strategies for advocating for appropriate use of assistants as well as for methods to reduce the confusions between assistants and professionals.

Strategies for instructing students regarding the use of assistants could involve case studies or having second year graduate students co-supervise assistants with their clinical supervisors. This would provide experience differentiating the roles of assistants and professionals.

### **Council of Academic Programs in Communication Sciences and Disorders**

The Council can support academic units' responsibilities regarding assistants in several ways. First, the Council can encourage academic units to include coursework on assistants in their curricula by providing links on the website to state rules for supervising assistants and to strategies for teaching about and supervising assistants. Second, the Council may provide a venue by which members may organize to request that ASHA consider Specialty Recognition in the Supervision of Assistants. Third, the website may serve as a clearinghouse for ideas regarding coursework about assistants and strategies for supervising assistants in academic coursework. Fourth, although it was suspected that there is little that can be about Otologist Techs (paraprofessionals trained by otolaryngologists to administer hearing tests), the Council should explore the effect that Otologist Techs will have on the practice of audiology and possible responses to these paraprofessionals.

### **Inviting Assistant Programs to be Members of the Council**

The members discussed the issue of inviting assistant programs to become members of the Council. The consensus was that this was an issue worth discussing

because it may be to our advantage to collaborate with such programs rather than to ignore them.

## APPENDIX

### Major Points Planned for Presentation

#### I. Background Information

##### *Speech-Language Pathology Assistants*

- only 8 states do not acknowledge/regulate/educate
- 16% of SLPs had at least 1 assistant in 2003
- assistants more likely to be in school settings

##### *Audiology*

- audiology assistants have more limited use
- Certificate Program for Otolaryngology Personnel -- Otologic technician

#### II. Models of Academic Program Involvement

##### *Assistants*

- Hands off
- Direct involvement (degree offerings, career ladder)
- Faculty members sit on Advisory Boards

##### *Supervisors*

- Designated courses
- Strategies included in coursework
- Issues mentioned in coursework

#### III. Education/Training

##### *Current requirements for assistants*

- High School Diploma plus additional training
- Associate Degrees

- Bachelor's degree
- Bachelor's degree with practicum
- Bachelor's degree plus graduate work
- Self-study, hands-on workshop (2 ½ days), supervisory period (Otologic Tech)

#### **IV. Minimizing Negative Effects**

##### *Background*

- concerns about assistants
  - ∞ impede client-clinician relationship
  - ∞ compromise ongoing assessment
  - ∞ allow unprepared individuals to practice due to lack of regulation
  - ∞ insufficient knowledge and skills may result in
    - failure to refer appropriately
    - increased number of treatment sessions
    - inappropriate feedback
- failure to regulate supervision could result in
  - ∞ insufficient supervision
  - ∞ assistants planning and/or altering therapy plans
  - ∞ assistants undertaking tasks outside scope/skills/knowledge

##### *Strategies to Preserve the Quality of Care*

- credential assistants
- require stringent education and continuing education
- educate professionals regarding their responsibilities (mandatory)
  - ∞ include in professional's license

### *Strategies to Protect the Practice of Professionals*

- do NOT credential assistants
- define assistants in law
- designate with titles far removed from 'audiologist' or 'speech-language pathologist'
- require minimal education for the assistant
- limit the number and/or amount of supervision a single professional can provide