

Clinical Conundrum

Addressing questions related to ethical and clinical practice issues in speech-language pathology and audiology

Question: I am the sole audiologist in my clinic and my employer has requested that I test newborns and infants even though I have no experience with the assessment of children. I graduated recently from an accredited university and have met all the requirements for registration with ACSLPA. Can I test children?

Answer: As a qualified audiologist you can test any age group. However, we need to be mindful that each of us is legally and ethically accountable for the services we provide: test administration, accuracy of the diagnosis given and the habilitation that may follow. To this end I have included sections from ACSLPA's Standards of Practice to give you an opportunity to do a self- assessment and ensure you meet the standards recommended.

Unit Four Neonatal and Infant Populations

Section 4.1 Early Detection / Identification

The audiologist demonstrates knowledge of:

- i.* The benefits of early intervention.
- ii.* Neonatal indicators for hearing loss.
- iii.* Universal newborn hearing screening protocols.

Section 4.2 Diagnostic Evaluation

The audiologist demonstrates knowledge of:

- i.* Physiological and behavioural assessment procedures for evaluation of auditory function in infants (including otoacoustic emissions, auditory evoked potential audiometry, immittance testing, visual reinforcement audiometry, and behavioral observation audiometry).
- ii.* Developmental milestones and implications of coexisting conditions when performing assessment procedures and differential diagnosis.

Section 4.2 lists the skills an audiologist needs to demonstrate in order to test this special population. Mastery of test procedures such as visual reinforcement audiometry and behavioural observation audiometry is necessary for valid testing of these young children. Use and interpretation of otoacoustic emissions and immittance tests are included in the gold standard for assessing auditory function in children. Evoked potential measures are often necessary for definition of the type and degree of hearing loss in very young or difficult to assess patients. These tools allow objective measures of auditory function for accurate diagnosis of normal or impaired hearing in clients who are too young to perform standard audiometry.

The Ethics section on the ACSLPA website refers to providing competent care and describes what registered professionals may do in circumstances which are not within their current practice. It states:

Competence

We provide competent care to the clients we serve.

Members:

- **work** within the scope of practice statement from the Health Professions Act for the professions of speech-language pathology and audiology.
- **engage** only in the provision of services that fall within their professional competence, considering their level of education, training and recent experience, access to professional supervision, or assistance from qualified colleagues.

Members will withdraw from practice in those circumstances where they are unable to provide safe and competent services.

Access to professional supervision or assistance from qualified colleagues is the key here. If this is an area of interest for you or it is a skill you need to master, consider partnering with another professional with that skill set. There are techniques that are perhaps best learned by demonstration or guided trial and technology allows us to meet in ways other than face-to-face. Request mentoring from a colleague; make a plan to become proficient in a new area of practice; connect with others by telehealth if you are in a remote area.

We have all met the criteria and are registrants of the Alberta College of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists, but the field of audiology has become so vast that one can no longer be an expert in all areas. Review the standards of practice and the ethical guidelines and ask yourself if you are professionally competent and can act in the area of question. Then, take the challenge!

We welcome your thoughts on this or any other clinical conundrum! Readers are encouraged to submit both their comments and their ethical clinical issues in question format to slp@acslpa.ca for SLP related issues and audiology@acslpa.ca for audiology related issues.
