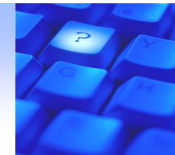


Clinical Conundrum



Note to Readers: *Clinical Conundrum* addresses member questions related to ethical, clinical practice issues in speech-language pathology and audiology. Although the question discussed in this newsletter was submitted by an SLP, the situation could potentially be relevant to an audiologist. We encourage both our SLP and audiology members to read on!

Q: I recently scheduled an initial speech-language assessment for a child, and the mother informed me that she has hired a speech assistant* who graduated from a formal training program to work with her daughter in their home. When I questioned the mother further, she indicated that the speech assistant is not being supervised by an SLP, but is focusing on therapy targets that the mother has identified. I am feeling quite uncomfortable about this arrangement and am concerned that a) the assistant is hiring herself out without a supervisor, and b) that there is an expectation that I should be providing the supervision. What should I do?

A: The College has recently received several inquiries regarding situations where a formally trained speech-language assistant has hired themselves out privately and in the absence of an SLP supervisor. Because the College does not regulate therapy assistants (and assistants are not actually regulated at all in the province of Alberta or anywhere in Canada at this time), we have very little recourse regarding this type of situation. There are, however, a few items worth noting:

- Section 128(1) of the *Health Professions Act* prohibits a person from representing themselves or implying that they are a member of a regulated profession unless they are in fact a member of a regulated profession. Specifically, an aide or assistant (or anyone else for that matter) may not hold themselves out as, or imply that they are, a member of ACSLPA. Should an aide or assistant imply or suggest that they are an SLP or audiologist, or have the same credentials as an SLP or audiologist, it would be important to contact the College to inform our Registrar of the situation.
- We encourage members to educate families regarding the differences between an SLP or audiologist and a support person, and the recommendations for supervision of support personnel. First and foremost, support personnel are not independent practitioners; they are assistants to practitioners. Critical

information for families should include the fact that the SLP or audiologist has the clinical and theoretical background to properly **assess** and **diagnose** speech-language / hearing disorders, to **develop** and implement appropriate treatment goals, and to **provide supervision** and suggestions to others with respect to implementation.

SLPs and audiologists are educated at a master's level (graduate university training), that includes both theory and clinical practice. Assistants, on the other hand, may have a variety of educational backgrounds. There are some formal speech-language assistant training programs now in existence (e.g., in Alberta, Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton and Medicine Hat College), and more and more assistants are graduating from these programs. Some assistants come with other educational backgrounds, while others may have very little formal training, but have learned "on the job". The focus of the training for an assistant is really on the **implementation** of therapy activities, as well as other tasks that support the work of the SLP or audiologist (e.g., ordering of materials, material maintenance, administrative tasks). Although assistants typically do assist SLPs and audiologists with speech, language, and hearing screening in order to identify which children are presenting with challenges, the SLP or audiologist maintains responsibility for the **interpretation** of any screening measures. Assistants should not be performing any formal speech-language or hearing assessment on their own.

So, to re-cap, *assessment, diagnosis, interpretation, and supervision* should be done by an SLP or audiologist, not an assistant, which provides some of the rationale for why an assistant should not be working independently. Families may also be directed to ACSLPA's *Guidelines for Working with Support Personnel*, which are available at the following links:

Speech-language pathology

[http://www.acslpa.ab.ca/public/data/documents/SLP_Guidelines_for_Use_of_Support_Personnel_Final_\(ECopy\).pdf](http://www.acslpa.ab.ca/public/data/documents/SLP_Guidelines_for_Use_of_Support_Personnel_Final_(ECopy).pdf)

Audiology

[http://www.acslpa.ab.ca/public/data/documents/AUD_Guidelines_for_Use_of_Support_Personnel_Final_\(ECopy\).pdf](http://www.acslpa.ab.ca/public/data/documents/AUD_Guidelines_for_Use_of_Support_Personnel_Final_(ECopy).pdf)

*For the purposes of this article, the titles **speech, language, and/or hearing assistant, aide, and support personnel** may be used interchangeably.

- SLPs and audiologists in private practice must carry professional liability insurance, and those in public practice have professional liability insurance that is provided by their employer. In most cases, the SLP or audiologist's professional liability insurance covers support personnel working under a professional's supervision. Even with this level of coverage, however, a support person is not necessarily exempt or protected from any action if they do something wrong.

Do private practice support personnel carry liability insurance? CASLPA does offer professional liability insurance as a benefit for their support personnel members. However, according to their guidelines, CASLPA support personnel members MUST work under the supervision of an SLP or audiologist. An information sheet entitled *Supportive Personnel Working Collaboratively with Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists* is available from the CASLPA website at:

http://www.caslpa.ca/PDF/supportive_personnel_working_collaboratively_eng.pdf

- If, despite your best efforts at education, a family continues to maintain a relationship with an aide or assistant who is not receiving any supervision, you could consider the following options regarding how to proceed:
 1. Provide consultation to the aide or assistant in question. Clarify (both orally and in writing) to all involved that the input you are providing is similar to the consultation provided to any other caregiver, such as a parent or a nanny, who is providing follow-up and completing "homework" in the home between sessions. In this situation, you are making it clear that you (and/or your employer) are **not** taking on formal supervisory responsibilities for the assistant.
 2. Provide supervision to the aide/assistant according to the guidelines set out by ACSLPA. In this situation, a formal agreement between all parties involved (i.e., the family employing the support person, the SLP, and the support person) clearly documenting the supervisory relationship and responsibilities is recommended. Both

ACSLPA's *Guidelines for Working with Support Personnel* and CASLPA's *Supportive Personnel Guidelines* and documents may be helpful resources.

The world of supervision and support personnel is evolving. The Therapy Assistant Association of Alberta (TAAA) is interested in pursuing regulation for their members, and so we may see regulation of aides and assistants in the future. In the meantime, it is possible that we will continue to see an increase in the number of support personnel hiring themselves out as private practitioners. Educating families and openly communicating with them regarding the roles and responsibilities of SLPs, audiologists, and support personnel is one means we have of ensuring role clarity and of ensuring that clients receive the appropriate services by the appropriate personnel.

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 Director of Professional Practice

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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 Susan Rafaat (director2@acslpa.ab.ca) for SLP-related issues and to Holly Gusnowsky (director1@acslpa.ab.ca) for audiology-related issues.