

ARCHIVES

NEW HORIZONS

BY

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A TALK PRESENTED AT A PUBLIC MEETING IN HORNSBY SHIRE  
COUNCIL CHAMBERS TO LAUNCH A SELF-HELP GROUP FOR HEARING  
IMPAIRED PEOPLE.

ON

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1. NEW HORIZONS

I would like to begin with a few words about my chosen title. It isn't always easy to find a title for a talk, but as one idea kept persisting, I finally decided on "New Horizons". I hope that subsequent events will prove that title to be an apt one.

We have brought you together for a number of reasons. In the first place to inform you. We think there is an area of need in Community Services for hearing impaired people of which many of you may not be conscious. Secondly, to explain a new project which may help to fill this need and thirdly to receive comments and suggestions from you, the audience. If you have constructive ideas to offer, please feel welcome to submit them, either verbally or in writing.

We are also very conscious of the fact that our audience tonight is in two sections. On the one hand, there are many people among you with normal hearing while there are also some who must contend with hearing problems. Probably these problems range across the whole spectrum of hearing loss. We will be trying hard to adapt to that and if we succeed, another point has been won.

Perhaps, at this stage I should include a definition of the terms which I shall be using. The term deafness is being popularly supplanted in some quarters by hearing impairment. Strictly speaking deafness refers to loss of all hearing and this is rare. Hearing impairment covers the whole range of hearing loss and may be qualified as mild, severe or profound.

By way of introduction let me try to outline a need. Having lived with a gradually increasing and currently severe hearing loss over a large part of my adult life, I have for a long time been convinced that something more is needed in services for people who have suffered a hearing loss after the acquisition of speech and language. This need which does have a certain urgency lies in the area of rehabilitation services. Unfortunately, the urgency of the need is not generally recognised. Probably, this stems from the fact that our disability is not really an obvious one. Largely, I think, because we have acquired normal speech and language, the tendency is to consider us as perfectly normal and the depth of our handicap is not generally recognised.

Hence, we decided to make use of a public meeting to launch this new group. I think that the community needs to be alerted not only to the problems and needs of the hearing impaired, but also to the fact that this is one area of disability where the community could help. Hearing impairment by its very nature poses communication problems. Because communication is a two-way process, it is very difficult and in many cases impossible for hearing impaired people to master their disability solely on their own efforts. If we are to succeed in community living, we do need some community understanding of our disability and the limitations it brings.

Perhaps, at this stage, I should include some recent history. Probably the first hazy thoughts about the group came to birth approximately seven years ago when I first met Dr Rosen by way of a survey which she was conducting. It seemed to me even at that stage, that hearing impaired

people needed something more than lip reading and hearing aids though I wasn't sure just exactly what. During the intervening years, the plan unfolded fairly slowly at first, but quickened markedly during the past 18 months and has really surged ahead since Deafness Awareness Week 1980. I consider that week to be really a milestone in the short history of Deafness Awareness. This was largely due to the efforts of Patricia Quinn Boas of the Handicapped Person's Alliance. She planned a comprehensive campaign which included the innovating idea of encouraging hearing impaired people themselves to speak publicly about their disability and its problems. I became a fairly active campaigner in the cause of Deafness Awareness and found the community response overwhelming. This served as a necessary stimulus in getting on with the job of group forming. During the whole 18 month period, I received much help and encouragement from Dr Rosen of the Audiology Department and Mrs Palmer of the Social Work Department at Hornsby & Kuringai Hospital. Both of these people, in some miraculous way, managed to fit this "something extra" into their very busy work schedules. Without their enlightened support, I doubt that my plans would ever have become a reality. The fact that they are reaching fulfillment during this International Year of Disabled Persons is a very apt co-incidence and also a very happy one for all of us.

Before I endeavour to unfold the plan of the group, I would like to spend a few minutes talking about 2 things: First - what hearing impairment means to me, and secondly what I see as the greatest problem of deafness and hearing impairment. To take the first point - for me hearing impairment is not just lipreading or a hearing aid, or a bell on my phone or an alarm clock that flashes a light. These things, complex though they are are but

the outward signs. Hearing impairment is a much more complex thing than that. It is how I feel when I am left out of things and passed over because I cannot communicate as quickly as other people. It is being fairly frequently rejected in all sorts of everyday situations. It is the trauma of being so close to the hearing community yet separated by a great chasm. It is the thing which isolates me from many stimulating and rewarding aspects of community living.

This brings me to the second point. In my opinion, the greatest problem of hearing impairment is the isolation which it brings. This isolation follows as a natural consequence from our communication problems. It will vary in degree from one individual to another, dependant on circumstances and the depth of the disability, but to some extent it will always be there. (If you think back to Deafness Awareness Week 1980, you will recall that the isolation of deafness was the central theme for the week and the official poster pointed this out very clearly).

Let me try to explain briefly how this isolation can affect us. Many of our limitations stem from the fact that we cannot readily discriminate speech sounds or sound direction. Hearing aids can usually provide the required volume but not the all important clarity. Hence, many of us can manage conversation with one, two or perhaps three people provided they are at close range and there is little background disturbing noise. But beyond that things become increasingly difficult and we usually find ourselves excluded from many stimulating aspects of community living - things which many of you probably take for granted. Such things as lectures, group discussions, meetings, academic as opposed to art and craft courses, parties, church services etc. - all become increasingly difficult, and in

many cases impossible. Recorded speech is difficult to hear so radio and T.V. suffer as also does music and the theatre. Phone calls, even with the help of the latest technology can be very difficult and in some cases impossible. These are the inherent limitations of hearing impairment which tend to isolate us in many aspects of everyday living. And this is really where hearing impairment hurts. When you are competing with the hearing community with the ears of a hearing impaired person you quickly realise that contemporary living is geared to sound and hearing. It seems to me that the community in general is not conscious of the fact that some of its members are isolated by a fairly impenetrable sound barrier. Contrast this with community attitudes to the isolation of Ethnic peoples. I think that there is some community support given to their needs and problems so it seems logical to hope that the community could also be made aware of the problems of the deaf and hearing impaired. However, we must also remember that whatever rights Ethnic people have gained are largely the result of their own efforts and persistence. So we, as hearing impaired people must learn a lesson from them. We must be ready to work long and hard towards reaching our desired goal.

I could just have said that hearing impairment is isolation and left it at that for you to work out for yourselves. But I think more needs to be said. I think too often in the past we have concentrated on the outward signs of deafness and hearing impairment, ignoring the basic problem. We have tended to gloss over it or simply to put it into the cupboard as one of those problems about which nothing can be done and forget about it.

Well I think the time has come to try a different approach. In these times when so many issues are brought out into the open, here is one which has been neglected for too long. I think that it should be talked about in depth, not just by hearing impaired people themselves, but by gatherings of hearing people /and hearing impaired people. Hearing impaired people need to be told that they have a great pool of information about the behavioural patterns of hearing impairment which does need to be shared. Hearing people need access to this information too. They need to be told that they can do something to help the hearing impaired. They need to be told that many hearing impaired people need and ardently long for better integration into the hearing community. In many cases they just cannot find an avenue of entry.

In the past, it hasn't altogether appeared acceptable to talk about these aspects of hearing impairment but I think it is a much more constructive approach to do so, because these are the things about which most hearing impaired people worry. We need to recognise the basic problem of isolation which hearing impairment brings. We need to consider the great void which deafness and hearing impairment can leave in a person's life. We need to work out a well organised plan to try to help hearing impaired people to put some of these missing things back into their lives.

This brings me to the topic of the group. It will aim to provide a new type of service for hearing impaired people and work at exploring ways and means of integrating them into the community more fully. For this reason membership will be open to hearing people as well as to those with a hearing impairment. To begin with, these hearing people will probably be families and friends of the hearing impaired, but we also hope to attract others who have never had any previous contact with hearing impairment. Such people

will have a very special contribution to offer.

The four main aims of the group have been summarised for you on a separate sheet. But a few further comments could be helpful. To promote a greater public awareness of deafness and hearing impairment heads the list of aims, because I cannot foresee any welfare work for the deaf and hearing impaired taking place until this awareness has been established. Many of you are here tonight as representatives of some group or organisation. We invited you as part of an overall plan to use this meeting as an exercise in Deafness Awareness as well as a way of advertising the group itself.

The second aim - to foster the integration of hearing impaired people into the community - is perhaps the most important one. I foresee that a great deal of effort will be expended towards this end. It needs to be investigated and researched by both sides of the communication network i.e. the hearing side, and the hearing impaired side. Hopefully some useful guidelines will emerge.

The third aim to provide support and insight for the families and friends of hearing impaired people will break fairly new ground. All too often the families and friends of the hearing impaired are familiar with only one pattern of hearing impairment. They need to be introduced to other hearing impaired people to broaden their understanding of this disability and its problems. This very broadening must give them new insights and new directions.



Lastly, the fourth aim - to stimulate hearing impaired people to act more confidently. In group activities we hope to find ways and means of boosting the confidence of hearing impaired people. Too often, these people tend to lose confidence. In the face of a series of rejections we often react in one of two ways - either by withdrawing or becoming aggressive - neither responses being desirable.

We plan to run the group as a pilot study for the first 12 months, aiming to be flexible in our operations and amenable to new ideas. At this stage we plan monthly meetings. The first working meeting will take place three weeks after this one. This will be a special meeting to explain the program more fully and call for suggestions. If you have constructive ideas to offer, please feel welcome to attend this meeting, even if you do not wish to join the group. In fact, I would like to see this sort of condition as an ongoing thing, with people always being encouraged to attend a meeting either to learn a little more about hearing impairment or to offer some helpful suggestion.

In the audience tonight there are some people representing different areas of the arts. They were specially invited as part of a preconceived plan. I think it is important that they are given some insights on the great void which deafness and hearing impairment can leave in a person's life. Hopefully, as a result they will take up the challenge of trying to give deaf and hearing impaired people greater access to the arts. I hope they will be interested in attending some of our meetings to educate us in ways of making greater use of what is currently available in the arts.

In the overall view I feel that there is a great wealth of resources in the community, professional and otherwise to which hearing impaired people need access. We really do need to hear from audiologists and speech therapists who are perhaps best suited to help us. It seems to me in fact, that we are in a fortunate position here. We do have a body of highly trained people who are very interested in this whole idea of rehabilitation for the hearing impaired. In the past we haven't tapped this resource very much. As with so many other things shortages of numbers and funds pose a limiting factor. I mention this to suggest the need for a new emphasis in work for hearing impaired people.

We need to hear from the families and friends of hearing impaired people - from people who work and recreate with them - from the mothers of deaf and hearing impaired children.

We need to hear from English teachers who could assist with exercises in alertness and language skills. In my view this is an important consideration. In most situations hearing impaired people will never be able to rely on hearing everything even with the help of lip-reading and hearing aids. Hence we must aim at being alert enough to piece together what small clues we may receive into some intelligible conversational pattern. I think that a well organised and fairly comprehensive training program could help and should be considered as a matter of urgency.

Finally, I think it is important to state that the onus throughout is on the hearing impaired person himself or herself. We must really be capable of making continued efforts to keep our avenues of communication open.

We must have the opportunity to think out our strategies (and this is where the group comes in) but we must also be capable of carrying them out. However, even our best planned strategies will not work without the support of the hearing community.

In conclusion I would like to remind you that these are but my views. We do need to hear from other hearing impaired people too. Perhaps my part has merely been to be the instigator. I don't claim to have all the answers, but I do claim to having lived with this disability for a long time and thought about it a lot. Over the years I've also got to know quite a number of hearing impaired people and this has broadened my knowledge of hearing impairment. My thoughts and experiences have led me to feel that hearing impaired people should have greater access to the community, so perhaps we could get together and try to work out ways of bringing this about. (This incidentally is the whole idea of the group). There isn't much point in hearing impaired people trying to do this alone because the hearing community really holds the key. This International Year of Disabled Persons is certainly an ideal time for getting this message across.

The real challenge lies ahead for all of us - hearing and hearing impaired people alike. If the problems of hearing impairment are shared in the ways which I have outlined then we will at last begin to have access to the stimulation, the interests, the communication you can offer us.