



REPORT, ARRC Webinar March 6, 2024, 7:00 p.m. via Zoom

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“Communication and Swallowing Health in Long-term Care”
Presented by Richard Welland Ph.D.

ARRC’s third webinar of 2024 was presented by Speech-Language Pathologist Dr. Richard Welland, representing Speech and Hearing B.C. (SHBC). This very interesting and informative webinar was chaired by ARRC Leadership Team member Louise Holland and IT was coordinated by ARRC Leadership Team member Janet Epps. The webinar was attended by 15 people.

Dr. Welland began by introducing Speech and Hearing B.C., a professional, not-for-profit association representing over 1,200 Speech Language Pathologists (SLP’s) and Audiologists. He also explained the difference between SHBC and the College of Speech and Hearing Health Professionals of B.C.

Next came a discussion about the role of SLP’s who treat and/or manage speech, language and swallowing disabilities across the lifespan and counsel clients on how to live with their disabilities. Of particular interest to ARRC’s membership is the fact that approximately 75% of long-term care residents experience difficulty with communication because of various medical conditions, many have hearing challenges, and over 50% have difficulty swallowing.

Participants did not seem surprised to hear that very few long-term care residents have ready access to a swallowing assessments and that many receive a texture-modified diet (e.g.: pureed food) which is not necessarily appropriate for them.

Dr. Welland went on to discuss the nature of communication – some of which involves interaction and connection with others. He described the complex cognitive abilities and skills required to communicate e.g.: attention, memory and executive functions, as well as the ability to read and write.

The impact of communication disabilities is wide-spread and potentially serious: social isolation, depression, behavioural disturbances (e.g. caused by frustration related to being unable to communicate with others) and reduced agency (related to inability to express needs). These issues can lead to adverse medication events, diminished participation in life activities, masking of mental capacity and reduced cognition (related to untreated hearing loss).

Dr. Welland went on to describe the complex physical abilities involved in swallowing and the problems swallowing difficulties can lead to including aspiration pneumonia, poor nutrition and/or dehydration, reduced satisfaction with meals and diminished quality of life. He described the purpose of an SLP assessment which is to identify the presence of speech and/or language disorders and potentially assist with medical diagnosis. As part of the assessment



process, the resident, family members and staff are interviewed. It is a complex process, for example involving evaluation of speech and language production and comprehension skills, social communication and memory skills as well as environmental supports such as lighting, signage and acoustics.

A swallowing assessment is likewise specialized and complex involving assessment of levels of awareness and attention, swallowing anatomy and physiology, oral health, adequacy of diet texture and the dining environment itself (e.g.: how many distractions the resident experiences during the mealtime). Access to diagnostic equipment is required.

Dr. Welland stressed that speech and language interventions are resident-centred and customized to the results of the assessment. Intervention plans may also include provision of education for staff and family members, referral to other professionals such as Audiologists, alternate communication systems, strategies related to modifying the environment to better support communication, and advocacy for residents' informed choices.

In closing, Dr. Welland noted that there are only six to seven SLP's for long-term care across British Columbia, most of whom provide part time service to long-term care facilities administered by regional health authorities. There are no Audiologists. SHBC continues to advocate for improved funding of services for seniors at home and in care.

Questions raised during the "Q and A" often started with thanks expressed to Dr. Welland for his very helpful presentation, the work of his organization's practitioners and for their advocacy. Participants posed a number of interesting questions which resulted in instructive discussions.

ARRC extends sincere thanks to Dr. Welland for an excellent presentation, to Louise Holland for skilled facilitation and to Janet Epps for expert IT management. We hope you will join us for the next ARRC webinar to be held on April 10, 2024. On that evening, leading Canadian gerontologist Dr. Gloria Gutman from Simon Fraser University will speak on "Abuse and Neglect in Long-term Care". No registration is necessary and there is no cost.