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A Rose by Any Other Name…

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In 1878, the first school for children who were deaf in Ontario opened in Toronto.[1] It was called the Upper Canada Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, a name that is appalling by today's standards. The explanation that is frequently offered is that the word "dumb" meant that the person was "unable to speak." However, during that time period, people who were deaf were commonly believed to be less intelligent. This myth dates back at least to 384–322 B.C when the Greek philosopher Aristotle incorrectly postulated that people who were deaf were incapable of reason, because in his view, reason was not possible without the sense of hearing.[2] Clearly, use of the word "dumb" is not only incorrect, but hurtful.

That was a long time ago. But are we any more respectful in our use of language today?

In the interest of full disclosure, I am a person with typical hearing. So, I do not get to decide what people who do not have typical hearing ought to label themselves. But, if anyone happens to be interested in my auditory system, then I choose to be referred to as a person with typical hearing. I, like many other people, reject the term "normal hearing." As an audiologist, I have worked with large numbers of people who hear differently than me. They access sound through use of hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other technology. This is "normal" for them. They do not hear in a typical way, but they still hear.

Use of the term "normal hearing" establishes an unfortunate dichotomy where people are considered either "normal' or "abnormal." And what about people who do not rely on their auditory system? Persons who do not access spoken language through technologies are not abnormal. There are somewhere between 138 and 300 languages around the world that do not require hearing for communication.[3] Not depending on hearing, is completely "normal" for users of signed languages.

The reality is, that labelling people around their use/non-use of their auditory system is controversial, and it is emotional. However, labels may be necessary in order for people to receive services, and to ensure that they have equal rights and full access to society. We cannot remove barriers for people if we do not identify which people are experiencing these barriers.

In the professions of psychology, education, audiology, and speech-language pathology, we often refer to the field of "childhood hearing loss." At a superficial level, this wording seems benign, although most of these children have never really "lost" anything. They were born with varying levels of hearing. Recently, I have observed parents talk about their child's level of hearing, rather than their child's level of hearing loss. This appears to be much more positive language. The focus is still medical, because the level of hearing is inevitably going to be compared to some established "norm." But at the very least, the first point of reference for the child is not going to be one of them being measured as less, or considered somehow deficient.

I recently attended a Canadian Hard of Hearing Association (CHHA) conference. I noticed that many people in attendance were identifying themselves as cochlear implant, or hearing aid users. They were not labelling themselves using a deficit model. I also noted that many people preferred to label themselves as “hard of hearing.” This term probably dates back to the 15th century when the word “hard” was used to describe something that was difficult, such as “hard to learn” for a student that struggled, or “hard to sleep” for someone who suffered from insomnia[4]. For many people who want to communicate using spoken language but do not have typical hearing, communication can be hard. And devastatingly so.

There are multiple labels in use. The term “hearing impaired” is one that some people find offensive because it makes them feel broken, or like a lesser version of a person who hears “normally.” For others, this may be a preferred term because in their view, they have lost their hearing, and wish they could somehow have it restored. The term “deaf” usually, although not always, refers to some audiometric level of hearing, while the term “Deaf” refers to people who identify as members of the Deaf Community and utilize a sign language as their preferred language of communication. And there are others labels in use that have not been mentioned here.

Ultimately, people who do not have typical hearing have a right to label themselves. We need to be respectful of their labels and take our lead from them. I do believe that we must move away from this normal/abnormal dichotomy because it is both inaccurate and harmful.

With all due respect to Shakespeare and his roses,[5] what we call someone is important, language is powerful, and labels can hurt.

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