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Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Recognizing Privilege

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A few years ago, I had a set of in-ear headphones that I used to listen to music, and, as an audiologist, I made a pair of custom molds. Because the eartips frequently slipped out of the silicon molds, I used a short length of #13 hearing aid tubing to secure them, but over time the tubing yellowed and cracked, and I needed to replace it. I had a great multi-tool in my office, much like a Swiss army knife but for quick repairs- it had a few blades, a few screw driver tips, and a few things I have yet to recognize. I brought it home to help me replace the tubing in the in-ear headphones. I never thought twice about walking around with a potentially deadly weapon in my pocket.

After I got home, I started thinking about carrying around a tool that could easily be mistaken for a weapon. If the authorities stopped me, I could explain why I was walking around with a concealed knife, and that would be the end of it… but others may not have had such an easy time of it. My privilege was so implicit and covert that I didn't think of it as anything special- why should I? I just assume that I will receive respectful interactions with the authorities, excellent service at a store or restaurant, and high-quality health care.

I am a straight, white, middle-class, conservative-looking man, with a short beard (and starting to lose my hair- see picture below). In short, I have every privilege one could have. Nobody would think twice if I walked into a store or sought out healthcare services. Other than having difficulty spelling the word "privilege" correctly (… or is it "privaledge?"), recognizing it may take a lifetime.

But perhaps not everyone is as privileged as me?

What about someone who was having trouble communicating and who was dressed poorly? What about someone who had spiked hair that made it difficult to correctly place headphones on the ears for testing? What about a woman who had had a previous bad experience? What about a person in a wheelchair? What about…?

As audiologists, we can sometimes be oblivious to the special needs some of our clients may have. A solution may be as minor as leaving the office door open, or rearranging the furniture so that our clients would not feel "trapped"; it could be rethinking an assumption that a certain person wouldn't really want to learn about an assistive listening device because "obviously" they wouldn't know how to use it; or it could be about using gendered pronouns when that would not be appropriate…

This issue of CanadianAudiologist.ca was supposed to be about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), and it is. Still, as pointed out in Janine Verge's excellent article, and Christopher Sutton's

Guest Editorial, it's also about another letter… "A". "A" is for Accessibility, and scrambling the letters, this issue is about IDEA. Our Guest Editorial is written by Christopher Sutton- "An even better *idea* than DEI". Christopher Sutton is Canada's new Accessibility Commissioner, appointed under the Accessible Canada Act in 2024, and serves as a full-time member of the Canadian Human Rights Commission. And in 2022, Drs. Brenda Ryals and Kathy Pichora-Fuller coordinated an issue of Ear and Hearing, also on the acronym IDEA in a supplement on "… Promoting Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility in Research on Hearing and Hearing Healthcare" (Ear and Hearing, 43(Suppl. 4), 1S-4S)

Beginning with this issue, we will feature a regular article by Lorin MacDonald, CM, OOnt, LSM, JD, titled Access Points. Lorin is a hard-of-hearing disability rights lawyer with over 30 years of experience in accessibility law and advocacy. She is a Member of the Order of Canada, the Order of Ontario, and the Canadian Disability Hall of Fame, and was named one of Canada's Top 25 Most Influential Lawyers.

Privilege can be quite covert, but recognizing it is the first step towards becoming an ally, and a better audiologist.