

Seeing Pandemic Challenges as Creative Opportunities

What does the future of audiology hold for professionals and patients? If, in January 2020, we had been told that the world would shut down due to a pandemic, we would have thought the idea crazy. On any given day, health care professionals encounter barriers when attempting to treat patients; some barriers are new to the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas others have been long-term challenges. As a privately practicing doctor of audiology with a master's degree in education of the deaf/hard of hearing (DHH), I have witnessed the challenges that practitioners and individuals with hearing and/or balance difficulties have faced during the pandemic, including their access to audiology services. When COVID-19 first entered our lives, many patients had difficulty obtaining services. These challenges were due, in part, to concerns about virus transmission because of close contact with loved ones and doctors, but they were also due to clinician access. Some audiology clinics, whether private practice or within a hospital or university, temporarily closed their doors or were forced to make staffing changes. Not only did patients have difficulty getting the full services they needed but providers were furloughed or lost jobs, which made the effort to obtain services even more dire and difficult.

The pandemic may have launched telehealth into a more widely used means of patient treatment, including teleaudiology, but the concept has been trending in this direction for years. Rural areas in the United States have been utilizing teleaudiology due to terrain, weather conditions, and patients' limited accessibility to medical professionals.

As audiologists, we can either let these challenges create barriers or we can use them as motivators for creativity that can allow our practices to adapt and grow. The ability to adapt—and to encourage our own personal and professional growth—makes teleaudiology both promising and innovative.

Was the process of founding my own practice scary? Absolutely! While my children were attending live-streamed school, I took courses and participated in lectures through various educational sources in our audiology world as well as through the Maryland Small Business Development Center (SBDC). These courses included various how-to's (e.g., establish a business, develop a business plan, apply for a business loan) as well as courses on insurance, finance, budgeting, bookkeeping, website design, and search engine optimization (SEO). The SBDC assigned me a business counselor who communicated with me regularly, gave me "assignments" to establish a strong business framework, and connected me with necessary resources to launch and continue my practice. If you are interested in establishing your own practice, I recommend ASHA resources such as The ASHA Practice Management Portal, ASHA Audiology Practices and The ASHA Leader in conjunction with contacting the SBDC in your state to get more information. Utilize all your free resources before you start spending money. Putting together your team of trustworthy and gifted professionals to mentor you through your business journey is essential. When we do find mentors, they are often individuals outside the profession who need to be introduced

to audiology first. Once you establish your plan and your team understands your business model's needs, the sky is the limit!

I am the founder, owner, and head audiologist at A 2nd Ear; my team and I studied the limitations that the pandemic put on providers and patients alike, collaborated with other professions, developed a plan, and, in April 2022, launched a telehealth audiology practice to overcome geographic boundaries, health concerns, geriatric challenges, and transportation limitations while providing excellence in hearing and balance care. We have worked with hearing aid technology from most of the major hearing aid manufacturers in the world and have noted the benefits and limitations associated with such devices for both in-person and teleaudiology care. This allows us to predict challenges that our patients may face before they happen. There will always be problems that we need to solve to put the smile back on our patient's face or to see the look of relief on the face of a patient's loved one. Knowing the challenges and needs of the patient and their loved ones allows us to guide them to the technology that will improve their lives. Isn't that why we chose to be audiologists?

Modern technology now prevents distance and physical limitations from being barriers. Teleaudiology allows us to counsel patients and their families together, even if they reside in different locations. Counseling is key in our profession. We establish realistic expectations and change our techniques based on the needs of our patients and their loved ones. Patients can have their hearing aid programmed in their own

environment—in real time! Look at how far we've come!

In my practice, we utilize both in-person clinic appointments and various telehealth technologies that enhance the patient experience and provide them the care they need on a regular basis. As one parent said to me, "My daughter went from listening in black and white to hearing and understanding speech in color. Thank you." These are the moments that make us remember why we love being audiologists.

As the pandemic continues and as our realities continue to shift, we as private-practice audiologists will change and evolve as needed to meet the needs of our patients. Teleaudiology breaks distance barriers, allows for in-home treatment and follow-up care, and cuts down the need for commuting time, waiting rooms, and delays due to health concerns. May we all keep learning, evolving, and collaborating. I'm excited to see what will come next!



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