

# Communication and social implications to people with aphasia in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 pandemic: An update report

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## Background:

- Aphasia is an acquired language disorder that affects one to understand, speak, read, and write.
- Most common cause is stroke, but people with dementia, traumatic brain injury, or other neurological conditions may also show aphasic symptoms.
- According to Hong Kong Department of Health and Hong Kong Hospital Authority, there are over 20,000 new cases of stroke every year; up to 40% of these survivors show varying degrees of aphasia.

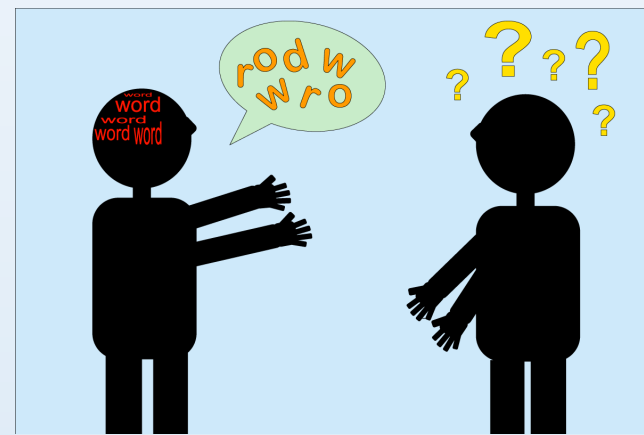


Photo: Stroke Support Association

## Objective:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects on many communities globally, but people with aphasia (PWA) may face particular challenges due to their inherent difficulties in communication, cognitive and physical functions, and social engagement<sup>1</sup>.
- We aim to retrospectively report how COVID-19 lockdowns in Hong Kong have affected the communication and psychosocial well-being of PWA and their caregivers.

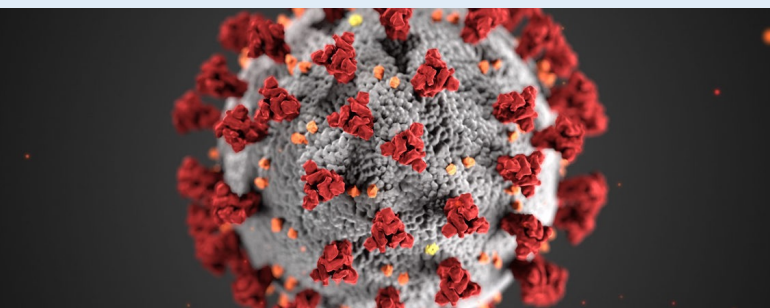


Photo: US Consulate General

## Methods:

1. The results of multiple survey and interview studies that examined the effects of the pandemic to PWA and their caregivers were summarized.
2. Review of a series of related studies that focused on other clinical populations in the rehabilitation context.



Photo: GovHK

## Results:

- ❖ **43 chronic-phase PWA<sup>2</sup> + 25 caregivers of PWAs + 63 unimpaired speakers as controls**
- ❖ All completed a 70-item survey questionnaire
  - ❖ demographic information
  - ❖ knowledge about COVID-19
  - ❖ communication and social patterns before and after COVID-19
  - ❖ psychological well-being
  - ❖ negative emotions after COVID-19
- ✓ **Finding 1:** All 3 groups experienced abrupt changes in communication and social engagement patterns
- ✓ **Finding 2:** PWA' psychological well-being, particularly in the dimension of environmental mastery, was poorer
- ✓ **Finding 3:** >1/3 of PWA experienced some degree of negative emotions
- ✓ **Finding 4:** At least 2/3 of PWA had difficulties in receiving/understanding pandemic-related information

- ❖ Follow up of study<sup>2</sup> involving **17 PWA<sup>3</sup>** two months after the initial interview
- ✓ **Finding 1:** Regarding social and communication patterns, more PWA had spent additional time outdoors (6–10 hours weekly). Whilst there were a wider range of tasks PWA could do outdoor, leisure activity was the most common for only some PWA
- ✓ **Finding 2:** Concerning psychological well-being, PWA showed a further and significant decrease on “environmental mastery”
- ✓ **Finding 3:** Insignificant increase in the negative emotion of anxiety (related to practicing social distancing orders and contracting the disease) as well as depression
- ✓ **Finding 4:** Insignificant decrease in pressure

- ❖ **73 post-stroke chronic-phase PWA<sup>4</sup> + 81 controls**
- ❖ All PWA were already discharged from rehabilitation services before the COVID-19 emergency with different degrees of linguistic impairments
  - ❖ Hospital Anxiety & Depression Scale (HADS)
  - ❖ Stroke & Aphasia Quality of Life Scale-39 (SAQOL-39)
- ✓ **Finding 1:** Significant deterioration in PWA, in terms of communication and psychosocial scales of the SAQOL-39
- ✓ **Finding 2:** Lower levels of depression and anxiety in PWA than in the healthy group

- ❖ **16 chronic-phase PWA<sup>5</sup> + 7 caregivers**
  - ❖ In-depth interview + inductive content analysis on changes in lived experience
  - ❖ disability scale of the Comprehensive Aphasia Test on psychological impacts due to COVID-19
- ❖ **10 Speech Therapists<sup>5</sup> (ST)** were interviewed to investigate the actual changes of delivery of aphasia services amid the pandemic
- ✓ **Finding 1:** PWA and caregivers were disrupted in outdoor activities, communication patterns and healthcare services
- ✓ **Finding 2:** Both service receivers (i.e., PWA + caregivers) and providers (i.e., ST) preferred in-person therapy sessions
- ✓ **Finding 3:** ST perceived a lower efficacy of teletherapy

## Discussion :

1. COVID-19 has affected how care can be adequately provided to address PWA's needs<sup>6,7</sup> and provided unique opportunities for robust evaluation of pre-outbreak aphasia interventions<sup>6,8</sup>.
2. Clinical support systems and resources for PWA and caregivers are important amid the pandemic<sup>6,8</sup>.
3. Keeping PWA abreast of the evolution of the pandemic can reasonably ensure they stay connected to their society, even without an actual physical presence in their community<sup>8</sup>. It is clinically important to help PWA stay “COVID-informed” through communicatively-accessible resources<sup>7,8</sup>.
4. Impact on patients with chronic diseases was disproportional by gender, age, illness severity, and country<sup>9</sup>.

## Key references:

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