MED THREE INSURANCE GROUP | Insurance Newsletter
A Three Holdings Company

Hearing Loud and Clear Audiologists' Liability Risks

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Our ability to hear plays a crucial role in human interaction and communication. Untreated or unmanaged hearing loss can have profound effects on people of all ages, including poor physical development in toddlers, language and cognitive difficulties in children, and mental health difficulties in adults. Mismanagement can cause even more damage. Identifying young people with disabilities, evaluating them accurately, and managing them appropriately is essential for ensuring maximum inclusion in community life.

The best way for brokers to provide their clients with the best coverage is to learn about this profession. The job of an audiologist in Canada is to identify, assess, treat, and (re)habilitate various disorders of the auditory system. As the field of Speech Language Pathology and Audiology develops to include new services and specialties, the risks audiologists face also expand.

Roles and Responsibilities of an Audiologist

SAC (Speech Language & Audiology Canada) describes Audiologists as “healthcare professionals who identify, diagnose, and manage peripheral or central hearing loss, tinnitus, vestibular and balance disorders, and other communication disorders across the lifespan.” (1)

Audiologists must hold a graduate degree in audiology from an accredited university. In most provinces, licensed or otherwise, they are governed by a regulatory body.

Among other things, audiologists are clinicians, diagnosticians, therapists, educators, consultants, researchers, and administrators. They provide audiological services in private practice, rehabilitation centres, hospitals, public health settings, schools, government agencies, and other venues.

The central focus of audiology is on human hearing, both normal and impaired, and its relationship to disorders of communication. Due to the relationship between vestibular and balance disorders and auditory impairments, vestibular and balance disorders are a secondary focus of audiology. Areas of practice may include the following:

- **Identification:** Developing and implementing screening programs to detect hearing impairments.
- **Assessment and Diagnosis:** Analyzing, interpreting, and determining the most appropriate course of treatment/management for auditory disorders using behaviour-based, electroacoustic, and electrophysiologic measurements of peripheral and central auditory systems.
- **Habilitation and Rehabilitation:**
    - Choosing, prescribing, fitting, and evaluating amplification devices, such as hearing aids, cochlear implants, and bone-anchored hearing aids.
    - Assisting and managing people with tinnitus non-medically using techniques that include biofeedback, masking, hearing aids, retraining, education, and counselling.
    - Working as part of a team within the school system that manages both peripheral and central hearing impairments. Audiologists provide consulting in areas such as classroom acoustics, assistive listening, hearing aids, communication, and the psychosocial effects of hearing loss. They also maintain classroom assistive listening systems and students' individual hearing aids.
    - Rehabilitation of vestibular disorders.
    - Working on cochlear implant teams.
    - Providing support and habilitation services for infants and children with hearing impairments.
- **Hearing Conservation:** Maintaining, developing, and managing sound-damage prevention programs for schools, government agencies, and industries.
- **Intraoperative Neurophysiologic Monitoring:** Analyzing and interpreting electrophysiological signals. In order to determine the diagnosis and determine the progression of the disease, these measurements are used in the pre- and postoperative evaluations of neural function, as well as the intraoperative monitoring of the central nervous system, spinal cord, and cranial nerves.
- **Research:** Studies regarding the normal and impaired auditory and vestibular systems, including design, implementation, analysis, interpretation and reporting of results.

Risks and Exposures Audiologists Face

Even the most skilled, experienced, and meticulous audiologist can face unpredictable situations. It is ever more likely that patients who feel injured by medical services will file a lawsuit over negligence and injury in the future. Whatever the situation is, audiologists are looking at a long, drawn-out, and expensive court case, whether the claims are frivolous or the audiologist was negligent. An

audiologist's business can suffer catastrophic losses alone from a lawsuit, resulting in their closing if they are a small operation.

An audiologist may face the following situations and exposures:

- As an example, here is a situation that may be covered by an audiologist's professional liability policy. An ear wax removal patient comes to the audiologist for treatment. A few days after the procedure, the patient develops an ear infection. The patient sues the audiologist, claiming damages to their inner ear and emotional distress. A professional liability policy may pay the defence costs as well as any settlement or judgment.
- Patients are elderly and at higher risk for injury.
- A child's misdiagnosis worsens an existing health issue.
- A patient slips and falls when they are in the auditory specialist's office and hits their head.
- The treatment room was water damaged by a burst pipe, damaging most of the test equipment beyond repair.

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Sources

1. https://www.sac-oac.ca/public/what-do-audiologists-do