Deaf culture and health care

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1 Being part of the Deaf community is not the same as having hearing impairment
About 357,000 Canadians identify as being part of the Deaf community (capital-D “Deaf”), a distinct cultural and linguistic minority that uses sign language to communicate and for whom deafness is an alternative state, not a disability requiring correction. In contrast, about 3.2 million Canadians have hearing impairment, some of whom have severe to profound hearing loss (lower-case d “deaf”).

2 Members of the Deaf community experience worse mental health, cardiovascular and sexual health outcomes than non-Deaf individuals
Given limited access to hearing-based mass media, ambient conversations and public health messaging, members of the Deaf community are up to 6.9 times more likely than non-deaf individuals to have inadequate health literacy. Deaf sign language users have significantly lower cardiovascular health knowledge than non-deaf individuals.

3 Not all people with severe to profound hearing loss are fluent in sign language
Each person’s preferred mode of communication, which may include lip reading, written communication, visual aids or sign language, should be confirmed. If sign language is preferred, an interpreter should be available. It is preferable not to assume that Deaf individuals have effective lip-reading skills, as their comprehension may be as low as 30%.

4 Technological advances can be leveraged to improve communication with Deaf individuals
Integrating innovations for sign language interpretation into clinical care, such as KinTrans (www.kintrans.com) and Sign-Speak (sign-speak.com), have substantial potential to improve communication with sign language users.

5 The availability of cochlear implantation has raised concerns about its impact on Deaf cultural identity
Although cochlear implants are associated with improved audition and spoken language development, their effect on cultural identity, social participation and well-being among Deaf individuals remains controversial. For example, integrating Deaf children with cochlear implants into standard schools has caused a decline in specialized deaf schools.