

# Promotion of vocal health in transgenders men

## Promoção à saúde vocal em homens transgêneros

## Promoción de la salud vocal en hombres transgénero

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### Abstract

**Objective:** To report the experience of speech therapy assistance in promoting vocal health in transgender men. **Method:** It is a descriptive, qualitative study of the experience report type developed from the experiences of the university extension project. The practice field took place at a private university, during the second semester of 2019. Eight trans men aged between 19 and 24 years participated. The consultations took place once a week, in an individual format, guided in full, that is, the therapeutic behaviors were adopted based on the needs and demands of the subjects. A vocal assessment was carried out and vocal assessment instruments were applied. **Results:** The main complaint mentioned by the participants was the oscillation between low and high voice during their communication and activities of daily living. Participants' satisfaction with vocal therapy exercises was observed. **Final considerations:** Speech therapy assistance, in the context of the trans population, has shown its importance in vocal improvement, becoming another field of action of Speech-Language and Hearing Therapy.

**Keywords:** Voice; Public Health; Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences; Voice quality; Transgender persons.

### Resumo

**Objetivo:** Relatar a experiência da assistência fonoaudiológica na promoção à saúde vocal em homens transgêneros. **Método:** Trata-se de um estudo descritivo, qualitativo do tipo relato de experiência desenvolvido a partir das vivências do projeto de extensão universitária. O campo de práticas aconteceu em

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ERS: Study design, Data collection, methodology and Article writing.

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uma universidade privada, durante o segundo semestre do ano de 2019. Participaram oito homens trans com faixa etária entre 19 a 24 anos. Os atendimentos aconteceram uma vez por semana, em formato individual, pautados na integralidade, ou seja, as condutas terapêuticas foram adotadas a partir das necessidades e demandas dos sujeitos. Foi realizada uma avaliação vocal e aplicados instrumentos de avaliação vocal. **Resultados:** A principal queixa referida pelos participantes foi a oscilação entre grave e agudo da voz durante sua comunicação e atividades de vida diária. Observou-se a satisfação dos participantes quanto aos exercícios vocais de fonoterapia. **Considerações finais:** A assistência fonoaudiológica, no âmbito da população trans, tem mostrado sua importância no aprimoramento vocal, tornando-se mais um campo de atuação da Fonoaudiologia.

**Palavras-chave:** Voz; Saúde pública; Fonoaudiologia; Qualidade da voz; Pessoas Transgênero.

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** Informar la experiencia de la asistencia de terapia del habla en la promoción de la salud vocal en hombres transgénero. **Método:** Se trata de un estudio descriptivo, cualitativo del tipo relato de experiencia desarrollado a partir de las experiencias del proyecto de extensión universitaria. El campo de práctica se llevó a cabo en una universidad privada, durante el segundo semestre de 2019. Participaron ocho hombres trans de entre 19 y 24 años. Las consultas se realizaron una vez por semana, en formato individual, guiadas en su totalidad, es decir, se adoptaron las conductas terapéuticas en función de las necesidades y demandas de los sujetos. Se realizó una evaluación vocal y se aplicaron instrumentos de evaluación vocal. **Resultados:** La principal queja mencionada por los participantes fue la oscilación entre voz baja y alta durante su comunicación y actividades de la vida diaria. Se observó la satisfacción de los participantes con los ejercicios de terapia vocal. **Consideraciones finales:** La asistencia de terapia del habla, dentro de la población trans, ha demostrado su importancia en la mejora vocal, convirtiéndose en otro campo de acción de la terapia del habla.

**Palabras clave:** Voz; Salud Pública; Fonoaudiología; Calidad de la Voz; Personas Transgénero.

## Introduction

The National Policy for Integral Health for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites and Transsexuals (PNSI-LGBT), developed in 2012, was a milestone in recognizing the needs of this population, as it considers sexual orientation and gender identity as Social Determinants of Health (SDOH). In this context, the health promotion strategy, added to the perspective of the SDOH, aims to mitigate inequities and inequalities in health, with the establishment of guidelines aimed at guaranteeing the right to health, thus ensuring universal and equal access in the Unified System of Health (SUS)<sup>1</sup>.

The National and Integral LGBT Policy for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites and Transsexuals ensures full access and reception in the SUS, allowing the visibility of the population that, since the 1970s, has been fighting for equal rights and fighting discrimination. This achievement, although incipient in some regions of the country, favored the expansion of the Transsexual-

izing Process (PrTr) and the use of the social name in the public health services. It is noteworthy that the transexualizing process comprises a set of strategies that aim to contemplate comprehensive care, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary work, humanized access and free of discrimination at all levels of health care. Primary Care should be the main entrance of the user, being responsible for the reference for specialized care of the Transexualizing Process in outpatient and Hospital Care<sup>1,2</sup>.

Studies reveal the existence of barriers in accessing health services, characterized by episodes of transphobia, transvestites and disrespect for the social name, showing the unpreparedness of health professionals to the LGBT public<sup>3,4</sup>. It should be noted that the social situation for the transgender population is quite difficult, as they face, beyond the prejudice by Brazilian society, the stigma printed by gender issues, in which it is a question of “true man” only one who was born biologically with the male sex<sup>5</sup>.

The concept of gender starts from a construction of social identity and a self-perception

that are independent of biological sex. In other words, gender is the way to identify personally and socially as man, woman and other definitions. Sex, therefore, is a way of biologically classifying people into males or females, based on organic characteristics, such as: chromosomes, hormone levels, reproductive and genital organs. Thus, the transgender man (or, simply, trans man) is one who was born biologically with the female genitalia, but identifies himself psycho and socially with the male gender<sup>5,6</sup>.

Among the characteristics that allow passability is the human voice, making up an important part of the construction of our identity during oral communication, involving from physical, emotional, age, gender and personality aspects. The non-conformity with the voice has already been evidenced in the literature in negative impacts to the transgender population that in recent years sought out speech therapy clinics for vocal readjustment to the new gender identity. However, studies dealing with the promotion of vocal health in trans men are scarce, showing the need to bring greater contributions to speech therapy activities<sup>7,8,9</sup>.

In this perspective, the university extension program emerges as a strategy to provide the community with access to actions and services developed at the university, playing a social role in view of the real needs of the population. Thus, with the aim of making assistance practices for promoting and educating vocal health to trans men, university extension corroborates the promotion of comprehensive care, reaffirming the subject to his gender identity, not only to physical and vocal characteristics. It is emphasized that the voice can be a reason for discrimination and prejudice for not being in conformity with gender identity, adding to other factors responsible for the process of illness and suffering of the transgender population<sup>10,11</sup>.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to report the experience of speech therapy assistance in promoting vocal health in transgender men.

### Experience description

This is a descriptive, qualitative study of the experience report type developed from the experiences of the extension project: Voice and identity promotion of vocal health in transgender men. The project aims to promote vocal health to trans men through guidance on voice care and vocal exercises,

aiming to improve the voice as an identity component. The practice field took place at a private university, during the second semester of 2019. The assistance activities are part of the extension project composed of six speech therapy students from the institution and two speech therapist teachers with voice and public health specializations.

The meetings were once a week, in the afternoon, in individual format, guided in integrality, that is, the therapeutic behaviors were adopted based on the needs and demands of the subjects. Eight trans men aged between 19 and 24 years with a high level of education (university students, different educational institutions) participated. As for the profession, most were unemployed and lived alone or with their mates. The time for each service ranged from 30 to 40 minutes, totaling nine meetings for vocal improvement during the period from October to November 2019. There were no exclusion criteria to participate!

Clinical visits were initially scheduled (via WhatsApp) and then a screening was performed to collect personal data to direct the participant to the service room. At that moment, an interview was conducted to gather information about vocal health and other morbidities. Vocal assessment instruments were also applied, namely: RASATI scale (Perceptual Assessment of the Glottic Source); Voice-related Quality of Life Protocol (V-RQOL); Voice Handicap Index (VHI-10) and Vocal Performance Questionnaire (QPV). The information regarding the vocal assessment was compiled through the guiding questions and will be described below:

### Main complaint

It was observed that the main complaint mentioned by the participants was the oscillation between low and high voice during their communication, resulting in anguish because their voices are not in accordance with gender identity. During our meetings, the paradigm of the socially imposed heteronormative vocal pattern was deconstructed, which designates that the cisgender man is one who must reach severe vocal frequency to be considered a man. Such a social pattern causes trans men a frustration, since their voices are not within the socially required standard. Because it is a marked factor in the perception of gender, there is already evidence that the voice has generated negative disturbances in the quality of life of trans people,

influencing daily and socially, with psychosocial impacts and vocal disorders<sup>7</sup>. It is noticed that the stereotype of the male voice has been related, by trans men, with the personal satisfaction of being identified in society by the male gender, and also with security in relation to the transphobic violence suffered by this population<sup>2,9</sup>.

### Hormonal treatment

When inquiring about vocal self-perception at the beginning of hormone therapy, trans men reported that there was a change in their voice between one and three months, however this change was accompanied by the oscillation of frequency between low and high during speech. Through the attendance, the satisfaction of some participants was observed when they identified more with their own voices even with the presence of oscillations. However, some trans men reported not noticing a difference in their voice when using testosterone. These findings corroborate with other studies, stating that changes in the voice of trans men may not be perceived and/or satisfactory, and may also show fluctuations in vocal frequency<sup>12</sup>.

It was noted that all participants were being followed up at referral centers for hormonal and psychological treatment. As for the time of hormonal treatment, it ranged from six months to two years. Hormone therapy promotes several changes in vocal and body physiology, resulting in an increase in muscle mass throughout the body of trans men<sup>13,14</sup>.

When inquiring about sleep during hormonal treatment, “snoring” was a sleep behavior that worsened after the start of hormone therapy, observed mainly by their mates. Our hypothesis is that, due to the increase in muscle mass, there is a relaxation of the muscular structures of the tongue, uvula and muscle palate causing a narrowing of the upper airway during sleep, resulting in snoring.

This observation is supported by some studies that showed changes in sleep quality in women in menopause. It is noteworthy that snoring is usually associated with men. Snoring tends to become more frequent at this stage of a woman’s life, because with the end of the reproductive cycle, there is a natural drop in the hormones progesterone and estrogen. In the case of trans men, this decline does not occur due to aging process, but due to the use of testosterone<sup>15</sup>. The importance of future research is

noted in order to understand the impacts of sleep-related hormone therapy.

### Binder utilization

“Binder” is a term used for items of clothing with the purpose of compressing the breast region. It was noticed that most participants who use the item brought complaints that they need to breathe several times during their speech. Corroborating the report, two cross-sectional studies conducted with the transgender population showed that 74 to 75% reported pain in the chest, shoulders, back and abdomen, while 51 to 52% reported breathing problems (such as shortness of breath)<sup>16,17</sup>.

Compression of the thoracic region can cause several losses for patients, such as anteriorized posture, muscle stiffness and respiratory problems, resulting in a decrease in air passage, generating tension in the vocal folds and cervical region<sup>12</sup>. It is noteworthy, however, that the use of the binder, although it is a contraindication, is associated with the discomfort of trans men with their breasts and that it interferes with their passability, with the need for guidance on the correct use.

Vocal promotion aims to improve the new gender identity, bringing your voice closer within anatomical and physiological limits, always considering the participant’s desire. We sought to propose an individualized therapeutic planning and according to the needs of vocal improvement, whose results were perceived through the participants’ satisfaction during vocal therapy exercises. In this way, speech therapy enabled the expansion of care in promoting care activities to this population. However, as it is a vulnerable and minority group, socioeconomic conditions influenced the assiduity of therapies, showing the importance of public policies that guarantee not only inclusion, but also the sustainability of the trans population in society.

It was observed that adherence to the project by trans men resided in the goal for vocal readjustment to their gender identity, although the use of testosterone has brought benefits to men for the voice. The use of the hormone has not been shown to be sufficient for good vocal quality, demonstrating the incompatibility of the voice with gender in your daily life. In this context, the promotion of vocal health added to the transexualizing process becomes relevant to trans men, going beyond the

logic that they do not need care for vocal functioning, especially when using hormones<sup>12</sup>. The literature still has limitations, specifically in trans men<sup>12</sup>, to understand the representations of the voice for the transgender men, given the importance in establishing the new gender identity, which can help in voice interventions.

## Final considerations

Speech therapy assistance has shown its importance to guarantee the promotion of comprehensive health for the trans population. In addition, the possibility of vocal improvement has become another field of action in Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences, even though speech therapists are not determined as mandatory professionals in federal resolutions and ordinances. It is noteworthy that speech therapy can contribute to the multidisciplinary team in the transexualizing process and provide trans men with better acceptance of the characteristics inherent to their voices.

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