

Contributions of speech-language-hearing services in specialized care for transgender people and cross-dressers in the Brazilian Unified Health System

Contribuições do atendimento fonoaudiológico na Atenção Especializada para a população de pessoas trans e travestis no SUS

Aportes de la fonoaudiología en la Atención Especializada para la población trans y travestis en el SUS

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Abstract

Objectives: To report the experience and performance of speech-language-hearing services in specialized care provided by the Unified Health System for transgender people and cross-dressers at the Identidade Transdiversidade Outpatient Clinic. **Methods:** This experience report was based on the scientific literature and conducted in transgender outpatient clinics, particularly the Identidade Transdiversidade

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Outpatient Clinic. **Results:** The analysis highlights the importance of speech-language-hearing services for these individuals, providing voice changes, reduced discrimination, improved self-esteem, and enhanced psychosocial well-being. The authors recognize the need, urgency, and relevance of implementing public policies to promote the comprehensive health of transgender people and cross-dressers. **Conclusion:** There are significant challenges to accessing specialized speech-language-hearing services. Overcoming these obstacles requires a multifaceted approach focused on the education and training of health professionals.

Keywords: Voice; Voice Quality; Speech Therapy; Health Services for Transgender Persons; Transvestic.

Resumo

Objetivos: Relatar a experiência e a atuação do atendimento fonoaudiológico na atenção especializada do Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS) voltada à população trans e travesti no Ambulatório Identidade Transdiversidade. **Métodos:** Trata-se de um estudo do tipo relato de experiência, realizado em ambulatórios trans, com ênfase no Ambulatório Identidade Transdiversidade a luz da literatura científica.

Resultados: A análise destaca que pelo atendimento fonoaudiológico, essas pessoas conseguem não só mudança vocal, mas redução da discriminação, melhora da autoestima e promoção do bem-estar psicossocial. Os autores entendem a necessidade e urgência, assim como a relevância da necessidade de implementação das políticas públicas para a promoção da saúde integral de pessoas trans e travestis.

Conclusão: Existem significativos desafios ao acesso do atendimento fonoaudiológico especializado, e para que esses obstáculos sejam superados é necessário que haja uma abordagem multifacetada voltada à educação e capacitação de profissionais da saúde.

Palavras-chave: Voz; Qualidade da voz; Fonoaudiologia; Serviços de Saúde para Pessoas Transgênero; Travestilidade.

Resumen

Objetivos: Relatar la experiencia y la actuación de la fonoaudiología en la atención especializada del Sistema Único de Salud (SUS), dirigida a la población trans y travesti, en el Ambulatorio Identidad Transdiversidad. **Métodos:** Se trata de un estudio del tipo relato de experiencia, realizado en ambulatorios trans, con énfasis en el Ambulatorio Identidad Transdiversidad, a la luz de la literatura científica.

Resultados: El análisis destaca que, a través de la atención fonoaudiológica, estas personas logran no solo una modificación vocal, sino también una reducción de la discriminación, una mejora de la autoestima y una promoción del bienestar psicossocial. Los autores reconocen la necesidad y la urgencia, así como la relevancia, de implementar políticas públicas para la promoción de la salud integral de personas trans y travestis. **Conclusión:** Existen desafíos significativos en el acceso a la atención fonoaudiológica especializada, y para superar estos obstáculos es necesario adoptar un enfoque multifacético orientado a la educación y capacitación de profesionales de la salud.

Palabras clave: Voz; Calidad de la voz; Fonoaudiología; Servicios de Salud para Personas Transgênero; Travestilidade.





Introduction

The quest for affirmation of gender identity poses complex challenges for transgender people and cross-dressers, especially regarding comprehensive health. Although the World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, this concept has been criticized, especially in the context of the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS), for failing to consider the historical and social aspects that permeate people's experiences. Therefore, it is important to adopt a broader perspective on health that recognizes transgender people and cross-dressers' specificities, vulnerabilities, and strengths, considering that their health needs are often neglected or misunderstood by traditional systems¹, and that the concept of health must incorporate each person's unique story and the social determinants that permeate the health-disease process².

Speech-language-hearing (SLH) care is an essential yet often underestimated component in the transgender health spectrum. The voice is not only a means of communication, but a profound expression of gender identity. Studies indicate that vocal dysphoria, characterized by a disconnect between perceived voice and gender identity, can have significant impacts on quality of life, contributing to increased social stigma, discrimination, and even violence³.

The 2013 Transsexualization Process Regulation⁴ does not mention SLH pathologists as part of the professional team for the care of this population, but studies show that most outpatient clinics authorized by the Ministry of Health include them in their teams⁵. The presence of SLH pathologists arises from the transgender people's needs concerning vocal expressiveness and communication.

The Identidade Transdiversidade Outpatient Clinic in the city of Rio de Janeiro is a specialized care model dedicated to transgender people and cross-dressers' comprehensive health, in which SLH therapy plays an important role. Specialized outpatient clinics are essential for offering comprehensive support, going beyond hormonal or surgical treatment, and addressing issues such as mental health, social well-being, and, of course, vocal transformation⁶.

SLH therapy at the Identidade Transdiversidade outpatient clinic begins with attentive listen-

ing to individual expectations and needs related to vocal production and communication. Each person is welcomed as uniquely as possible, and the therapeutic process is developed collaboratively, respecting their limits, desires, and goals.

More than just a set of techniques, voice therapy is understood as a journey of self-knowledge and communicative expression. Thus, SLH therapy is not limited to vocal modulation; it expands to the construction of new ways of being in the world, in which the voice becomes an instrument of power, authenticity, and affirmation⁷. The voice, as one of the central components of gender identity, requires specialized attention to ensure this population's well-being and comprehensive health. The lack of specialized SLH services can reinforce the cycle of discrimination and social exclusion, negatively affecting the mental health and quality of life of transgender people and cross-dressers.

The purpose of this communication is to address the importance and impact of SLH services in transgender outpatient clinics, specifically at the Identidade Transdiversidade Outpatient Clinic, on the comprehensive health of transgender people and cross-dressers. It aims to analyze how this service contributes to the affirmation of gender identity through vocal modifications and investigate its effects on reducing discrimination, improving self-esteem, and promoting psychosocial well-being.

This communication aims to report the experience and performance of SLH services in specialized care provided by the SUS for transgender people and cross-dressers at the Identidade Transdiversidade Outpatient Clinic. Furthermore, it seeks to present the impacts of this service on health and quality of life and critically reflect on the main barriers faced by this population in accessing specialized SLH care. This study can contribute to the development of public policies that guarantee access to specialized and inclusive health services, reflecting on the challenges and potential solutions for the effective integration of SLH services into healthcare networks for transgender people and cross-dressers.

Methods

This experience report aimed to communicate and discuss the relevance and effects of SLH services in outpatient clinics for transgender people, with an emphasis on the practices developed at the



Identidade Transdiversidade Outpatient Clinic, affiliated with the State University of Rio de Janeiro. This service is part of the Piquet Carneiro Polyclinic and the Pedro Ernesto University Hospital, integrating the specialized public healthcare line for transgender people and cross-dressers within the SUS. The outpatient clinic has a multidisciplinary team composed of professionals from various fields, including SLH therapy, psychology, psychiatry, endocrinology, gynecology, urology, and so forth. Services are provided through regulation by the State Department of Health, with prior screening by the network's basic units, such as community health centers.

A review of the national and international scientific literature on SLH care provided to transgender people and cross-dressers was conducted to contextualize and deepen the themes. The literature search was conducted in the PubMed, LILACS, and SciELO databases using the descriptors and keywords "Transgender Persons," "Voice Training," "Voice," and "Voice Quality." It included studies published between 2010 and 2023, written in Portuguese, English, or Spanish, and addressing aspects related to voice, gender identity, and the effects of vocal accompaniment, with an emphasis on Oscillatory Frequency (OF) parameters.

The research was based on the analysis of public accounts by transgender people and cross-dressers, available on blogs, civil society organization platforms, and social media, describing experiences related to SLH therapy focused on vocal adaptation in the context of gender affirmation and transition. These accounts cover aspects such as the impacts of SLH therapy on gender identity affirmation and vocal adaptation, the reduction of discrimination, improved self-esteem, the promotion of psychosocial well-being, and the challenges and needs for public policies.

Data collection involved selecting and reading public documents in which transgender people reported their experiences with SLH services. The material was organized based on recurring narrative elements, observing the ethical principles applicable to the use of public domain data, such as preserving anonymity, de-identifying subjects, and providing appropriate references to sources. Because the data were already published, there

was no need for submission to the Research Ethics Committee.

The accounts were read to analyze empirical material, paying particular attention to discursive recurrences and the meanings attributed to the vocal experiences. Thematic categories were defined based on recurring elements and meanings attributed to the narrated experiences, organized into three analytical axes.

The resulting reflections were based on the articulation between the data, the authors' experience working in care settings focused on the transgender population, and the reviewed scientific literature. This dialogue allowed for a critical and focused understanding of the role of SLH therapy in promoting vocal health and well-being and affirming the gender identity of transgender people and cross-dressers in the context of specialized public health care.

The methodological decisions of this study were guided by the importance of investigating how SLH services in a transgender outpatient clinic have responded to historically neglected healthcare needs, especially regarding the right to communication, access to services, and qualified listening to the experiences of transgender people. Document analysis was combined with content analysis of public narratives of transgender people, using a qualitative approach to capture the meanings attributed to voice in different contexts. The literature review supported the understanding of how social inequalities, marked by cisnormativity and transphobia, impact vocal experience and mental health and guided the interpretation of the therapeutic strategies employed, which sought to integrate communicative, expressive, and psychosocial aspects. The methodological design, therefore, aimed to capture the complexity of the therapeutic process in its articulation with structural barriers, such as the still limited professional training for this care and the subjective effects of social exclusion on transgender people's relationship with their voices.

Results

The results are presented in categories according to the study objective and the material consulted during data collection.





Impacts of SLH monitoring on gender identity affirmation and vocal adaptation

The analysis of public reports and academic literature highlighted the importance of SLH therapy in transgender people and cross-dressers' transition processes. Several participants expressed through social media that vocal adaptation was a significant step in their identity affirmation, allowing them to communicate in a way that reflects their gender. The voice is intrinsically linked to feelings and emotions and can be modified through subtle variations in speech patterns. Therefore, vocal therapy was often described as a liberating process that improved the quality of their social interactions and contributed to greater authenticity and congruence between vocal presentation and gender identity, which these individuals often describe as negative and embarrassing.

A literature review on transgender people and cross-dressers' voices identified a systematic study and meta-analysis focused on voice therapy and phonosurgery for transgender women. It addressed the methodologies used in female voice therapy and those for transgender women and cross-dressers⁸.

A systematic review explored the effectiveness of female voice therapy and phonosurgery, identifying 212 studies, of which 20 met the inclusion criteria. It was observed that post-intervention satisfaction among transgender people and cross-dressers ranged from 80% to 85% for voice therapy. The most common complications reported for each phonosurgery technique included decreased mean phonation time and intensity. A meta-analysis of f0 changes in 17 studies revealed an increase in voice frequency of 31 Hz with voice therapy alone and 26 Hz with voice surgery. This study concluded that the literature recommends both voice therapy and phonosurgery⁹.

These studies highlight the importance of voice therapy and surgical options in voice feminization for transgender people, emphasizing the need to consider individual preferences, desired outcomes, and potential risks when choosing between different therapeutic approaches.

Reducing discrimination, improving self-esteem, and promoting psychosocial well-being

The data collected indicate a direct relationship between specialized SLH care and fewer

discrimination experiences due to vocal expression. Through social media, participants reported feeling more confident and secure in various public settings such as the workplace, universities, and restaurants, resulting in less stigma and marginalization. Furthermore, improved vocal expression positively impacted many people's self-esteem, strengthening their identity, promoting social interaction, reducing exclusion and anxiety, and increasing psychological well-being.

The ability to express gender identity through voice has positively impacted mental health, with reports of less need for constant self-monitoring and lower levels of anxiety and depression. Moreover, the integration of SLH services into transgender outpatient clinics was seen as a recognition of the diversity and complexity of transgender people and cross-dressers' health needs, contributing to a more inclusive and multidisciplinary care model.

The challenges and need for public policies

During SLH therapy at the Outpatient Clinic, many transgender people and cross-dressers reported a history of difficulty accessing SLH services in their cities, especially with professionals trained to meet the needs of their gender identity. These reports highlighted the lack of a structured care pathway that considers vocal health as part of this population's comprehensive health. In several consultations, patients expressed the perception that vocal adjustment helps prevent verbal violence and embarrassment in public spaces and strengthens social security during the transition process. However, the absence of specific public policies focused on SLH therapy in this context poses significant challenges, such as the scarcity of specialized services, the low supply of trained professionals in the public health system, and the lack of clinical guidelines for transgender people. The data collected in the outpatient clinic demonstrate that professionals perceive the gap that patients feel and report, reinforcing the urgent need for public policies that guarantee continuous and qualified access to this care.

The results suggest that SLH therapy in transgender outpatient clinics plays a fundamental role in this population's comprehensive health. Vocal adaptation, which supports the affirmation of gender identity, reduces discrimination and promotes



psychosocial well-being, an essential component in the care of transgender people and cross-dressers.

However, despite the positive impacts, significant challenges were identified in accessing SLH services. The lack of specialized professionals trained in the specifics of the care of transgender people and cross-dressers, the vast majority of which are concentrated in Southeastern Brazil, coupled with financial barriers and high demand, limits the availability of these services nationwide.

Discussion

The results of this study highlight the critical importance of SLH care for transgender people and cross-dressers, in line with findings that emphasize voice therapy as a vital element in gender transition, promoting congruence between gender identity and vocal expression⁷. Vocal modification has consistently been reported as a significant milestone in the journey of gender identity affirmation, corroborating a study that documented the positive impact of voice therapy on transgender people's quality of life¹⁰.

There are multiple barriers to accessing care for transgender people, including the fear and distrust of healthcare professionals and inconsistent access to healthcare services¹¹. The intersectionality of experiences related to gender, class, race, and location increases these individuals' vulnerability, resulting in disrespect and additional mistreatment during encounters with the healthcare system. Cases like this reinforce the importance of a specialized and humane healthcare environment, ensuring access to adequate healthcare regardless of gender identity or other personal characteristics.

The reduced discrimination and improved self-esteem observed in this study reflect the findings of research that identified a correlation between voice therapy and decreased social stigma faced by transgender people⁶. These positive effects on psychosocial well-being highlight voice therapy as both a health care approach and an essential social and psychological intervention. This supports the findings of a study on the relationship between transgender people's vocal expression and mental health¹².

However, the challenges in accessing specialized SLH services highlight a significant gap in healthcare networks, echoing the need for greater training of healthcare professionals in providing

culturally competent care for the transgender population¹³. The need for public policies, emphasized by the results of this study, is corroborated by the analysis of a study that argues for the development of inclusive policies to guarantee the accessibility and availability of specialized healthcare services for transgender people and cross-dressers¹⁴. These findings suggest that SLH interventions may also be associated with improved self-esteem and psychosocial well-being by helping reduce the discrimination and social stigma faced by transgender people and cross-dressers¹⁵.

It should be noted that the effectiveness of hormone treatments in modifying the voices of transgender people and cross-dressers highlights the complexity of gender transition processes. Even after prolonged periods of hormone therapy, voice changes can be minimal for trans women and cross-dressers, since no single hormone has the power to raise the fundamental frequency, reduce vocal fold mass, or produce lasting effects on vocal tone⁹.

While hormone therapy can have significant impacts on other aspects of gender transition, such as the development of secondary physical characteristics, vocal adaptation often requires specific and targeted interventions. Therefore, recognizing the limitations of hormone therapy in vocal modification highlights the importance of specialized SLH support to achieve congruence between gender identity and vocal expression, thus promoting comprehensive health and psychosocial well-being for these individuals.

Healthcare systems must recognize the importance of SLH care as an integral part of the health of transgender people and cross-dressers. This implies not only expanding access to such services but also implementing specific training for healthcare professionals to promote culturally competent care sensitive to their needs.

This study reinforces the idea that comprehensive health care for transgender people and cross-dressers is a fundamental human right, requiring a multidisciplinary and inclusive approach. Hence, SLH services are a crucial component of this approach, capable of offering significant support in the process of transition and affirmation of gender identity, helping construct a more just and egalitarian society for all.





Final considerations

The reports analyzed in this study show that SLH services for vocal expression and adaptation, aligned with the transgender population's expressed identity, produce significant impacts on overall health. This population highlights the following benefits, among others: affirmation of gender identity, improved self-esteem, decreased anxiety and depression, reduced discrimination, and psychosocial well-being.

However, even with the benefits of SLH care for the comprehensive health of transgender people and cross-dressers, as professionals, we understand that significant challenges remain regarding access and availability of these services. Overcoming these obstacles requires a multifaceted approach involving the training of health professionals, the development of inclusive public policies, and the ongoing commitment of institutions to the comprehensive care of this population.

Thus, it is essential to promote public policies that expand access to specialized SLH services, ensuring that they are offered universally and free of charge.

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