



Ethics Review Committee (ERC) FAQs- COVID-19 and hearing service provision

9 April 2020

The Ethics Review Committee (ERC) is an independent committee that advises the Boards of Audiology Australia (AudA) and the Australian College of Audiology (ACAud). The ERC is responsible for implementing the [Complaints Management and Resolution Procedure](#) for members of Audiology Australia and the Australian College of Audiology in order to ensure that they abide by the [Code of Conduct for audiologists and audiometrists](#) (the Code of Conduct).

The ERC has recently received a number of queries from AudA and ACAud members relating to the ethics and the provision of hearing services in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This document responds to the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) received by the ERC to date. If you have any further questions you would like answered by the ERC, please contact the Ethics Officer at:

E: ethics@audiology.asn.au

P: (03) 9940 3911

AudA website: https://audiology.asn.au/Audiology_and_You/Making%20a%20Complaint

ACAud website: <https://www.acaud.com.au/contact-us/complaints>

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Is it ethical for me to provide hearing services during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The short answer is: Yes, as long as you are following the relevant Australian Federal and State/Territory Government guidelines, advice and legislation. This includes Australian guidelines, advice and legislation related to: COVID-19 risk screening of yourself, other staff and clients; physical distancing and/or quarantine restrictions, and; infection control procedures. This is in line with the following standards of the Code of Conduct:

- Standard 1- Members must provide hearing services in a safe and ethical manner
- Standard 9- Members must adopt standard precautions for infection control
- Standard 10- Members must take appropriate measures to avoid placing clients at risk if diagnosed with an infectious medical condition
- Standard 14- Members must comply with all relevant laws and regulations

You can find links to relevant COVID-19 Government resources and advice [here on the ACAud website](#) and [here on the AudA website](#). Be sure to check the latest Government advice relevant to your practice at least once daily as the situation is rapidly evolving.

Hearing services ensure that people are able to communicate and participate in society, reducing the serious effects of social isolation which are especially relevant in light of the current physical distancing requirements. The Australian Association of Gerontology (AAG) recently submitted a letter to The BMJ ([BMJ 2020;368:m1141](#)) calling for “usual” primary health care to be boosted in the face of COVID-19 to ensure people’s health care needs continue to be met. This will also help reduce additional harm from COVID-19.

Hearing services are a healthcare service and therefore included in the definition of an “essential service” in the context of COVID-19. Depending on the level of restrictions in place in response to COVID-19, hearing services may be exempt from certain restrictions along with other healthcare services. These restrictions differ between the different States and Territories so be sure to regularly check the links provided [here on the ACAud website](#) and [here on the AudA website](#).

Consider each client’s individual needs and wishes

As always, you should consider each individual client’s needs and wishes when deciding whether to go ahead with a hearing service. Even if your client passes the current risk assessment guidelines for COVID-19 in your State/Territory and you can potentially go ahead with a face-to-face service, they might still have reservations. This may be because they are worried about putting themselves or someone close to them at risk of infection. It would be unethical to pressure a client to attend a service if they did not feel comfortable in doing so, see in particular:

- Standard 2- Members must obtain consent prior to delivering a hearing service
- Standard 3- Members must promote the client’s right to participate in decisions that affect their hearing health

You should note that there may be legal protections for consumers in place regarding cancellation fees due to COVID-19. You can contact the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) or check the [ACCC COVID-19 \(coronavirus\) information for consumers](#) (see also Standard 14 in the Code of Conduct above).

You also have a right to consider your own personal needs

There are also personal considerations that each individual hearing care practitioner (i.e. audiologist or audiometrist) must consider when deciding whether they personally should continue to provide services. This includes considering the potential risks to themselves or other vulnerable family members/close contacts, as well as any carer or other responsibilities. [For information on leave options related to COVID-19 see here on the Fair Work Ombudsman’s website](#).

What can I do if I feel like my employer is pressuring me to behave unethically and place myself and/or my clients at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The ERC only handles complaints against, and provides information regarding, the conduct of individual audiologists and audiometrists. The ERC does not consider complaints against employers/hearing services that are not managed or owned by audiologists or audiometrists.

You have a responsibility as a clinician to stay up-to-date regarding the current Australian Federal and State/Territory Government guidelines, advice and legislation regarding hearing service provision during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes Australian guidelines, advice and legislation related to: COVID-19 risk screening of yourself, other staff and clients; physical distancing and/or quarantine restrictions, and; infection control procedures. For more information, see response to FAQ above "Is it ethical for me to provide hearing services during the COVID-19 pandemic?".

You should not place yourself, your clients or anyone else at risk just because your employer is pressuring you to do so. If your clinical judgement and expertise is telling you that you should not provide a service as it may place someone (including yourself) at risk of harm, then trust your judgement and decline to provide the service.

If you are experiencing bullying, threats or other pressure from your employer to breach Australian Federal and State/Territory Government guidelines, advice and legislation regarding COVID-19 risk screening, physical distancing and/or quarantine restrictions, and infection control procedures; you may want to seek advice from an employment lawyer, a union or the Fair Work Ombudsman. [Information on COVID-19 related employment matters can be found here on the Fair Work Ombudsman's website.](#)

There may also be a State/Territory health complaints ombudsman who can handle complaints against health service providers, not just individual health practitioners.

If your employer is a Contracted Service Provider under the Australian Government's Hearing Services Program (HSP), it also may be appropriate to contact them directly with your concerns. The ERC has forwarded a summary of concerns that have been raised by members to date regarding Contracted Service Providers' potentially unethical conduct during the COVID-19 pandemic to the HSP. The HSP has responded that they would welcome contact from anyone who feels a Contracted Service Provider is in breach of their contract or relevant legislation so that the HSP can investigate and take action as required.

The Ethics Officer can assist you in discussing your options and which body or bodies may be appropriate to make a complaint to regarding the conduct of your employer.

Is it ethical for me to close my business due to COVID-19 related issues?

This is not a question related to health ethics or the role of your professional body (i.e. AudA or ACAud).

This is a question that must be decided by each individual business based on a consideration of their unique situation, including financial and contractual considerations. You may find it useful to consider this [Pandemic risk management for business advice on the Business Queensland website.](#)

When considering difficult decisions regarding staffing, you might find it useful to consider this [information on COVID-19 on the Fair Work Ombudsman's website.](#)

I think my employer is being unethical by reducing my hours, having to let me go, or by reducing my bonus due to COVID-19

This is not a question related to health ethics or the role of your professional body (i.e. AudA or ACAud).

This is an employment-related query that should be asked of an employment lawyer, a union or the Fair Work Ombudsman. [Information on COVID-19 related employment matters can be found here on the Fair Work Ombudsman's website.](#)