RCSLT policy statement on transparent face masks

This statement was updated in April 2021 with the paragraphs highlighted below.

There is a communication challenge for all regarding reduced clarity and audibility while wearing face masks and face coverings. There is also an issue of equality in respect of the deaf community and those with hearing impairment, who rely on lip reading to communicate on an equal basis. It is also the case that the appearance of opaque personal protective equipment (PPE) may be distressing or confusing for people with communication challenge, including people with aphasia, autism, dementia or with learning disability as well as for children.

As health services restart, it is not always possible for speech and language therapists to work at a two-metre distance from their clients. By nature of what they do, which is supporting and developing someone’s speech, language and communication, it is really important that their client can see their mouth and face, in a safe manner. The use of transparent face masks is vital.

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists has been lobbying for the introduction of transparent face masks over the past year. Progress was made and in 2020 the UK Government confirmed that ClearMask™ was the supplier whose mask had been approved for use across the NHS and social care.

The ClearMask™ is single use per patient contact. The instructions say that it cannot be used in high-risk or surgical environments or during invasive procedures or aerosol generating procedures (AGPs). It should not be used where there is risk of excessive splashing or spraying of body fluids. The mask has not been assessed for bacterial efficiency to protect the client from the SLT and should not therefore be used in place of a Type I or Type II surgical mask or Type IIR FRSM to protect vulnerable clients. It also cannot be used if there is a potential risk of COVID-19 in the setting.

RCSLT strongly advises that SLTs trial using the ClearMask™ before seeing their clients so that they can assess suitability and safety. RCSLT also recommends that before using this product a risk assessment must be conducted using the RCSLT risk assessment framework which is in the RCSLT guidance on reducing the risk of transmission and use of PPE:

SLTs who have access to local infection prevention teams should also discuss infection prevention and control (IPC) measures with the IPC team.

RCSLT advises that it is essential for rigorous health and safety standards to be adhered to and for any mask to be tested, certified and approved for use by government to ensure that speech and language therapists and those with whom we work are properly protected at all times.

The ClearMask™ was not of clinical grade and we heard concerns from our members that during exaggerated facial movements the ClearMask™ moved resulting in gapping and uncovering of the nose and/or mouth. The RCSLT raised these concerns with NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care and pressed for the development of a clinical grade transparent mask.

Over the past months, RCSLT have been in discussions with NHS England and National Services Scotland to highlight the clinical need for a transparent mask which offers bacterial filtration and splash protection. RCSLT understand a specification / standard for clinically safe transparent masks will be published online shortly by NHS England. It will apply across the UK. Potential manufacturers will be able to access this and get their products tested against it. If manufacturers meet the required
standard, masks could then be ordered at national / local level. RCSLT have asked NHS England to clearly present the timelines by when they will supply masks across all 4 UK nations. Look out for updates in the E-newsletter and on the RCSLT website. For any further information in the meantime please contact info@rcslt.org.