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# Information Sheet

## Voice Care

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### Introduction

"Lost your voice? Ah well, you must have been shouting too much at the children".

"The children have been noisy today and my poor voice is really tired".

"I find my voice is husky and I can't sing any more".

"Oh, so you've lost your voice - well it's an occupational hazard in education, isn't it?"

Have you heard it all before? Is it about you or a colleague? Is this acceptable?

For a number of years, the problem of voice damage and voice loss in schools has come to our attention as a serious issue. It is not a life threatening issue but the quality of life of educators may be at stake. Teachers, lecturers and support staff are committed professionals, and, like all of us, they have probably suffered minor voice discomfort at some time or another. What is not generally appreciated is that continued voice strain can lead to serious damage to the vocal folds and vocal tract which, if not dealt with, can lead to permanent voice injury or voice loss. We have received a large number of letters from colleagues about this problem and, of course, one of the reasons why we receive letters rather than

phone calls is because speaking on the telephone is uncomfortable.

Some examples of what is contained in the letters we have received are:

- a. "I have been teaching for twenty two years and in the last five years I have had repeated throat infections . . . I never stop talking as a primary teacher . . . I realised that it might just be coincidence that my throat infections have come since my change to primary teaching - maybe it's just the onset of old age".
- b. "I have retired from my teaching post due to my losing my voice . . . medical opinion seems to be that my voice will never allow me to return to teaching for although I have a voice if it is constantly rested, any fairly prolonged use and it fails me. Also I have a constant irritation in my voice box which is far from comfortable. I have been discharged by two specialists and a speech therapist, as they say they have done all they can for me".
- c. "It is difficult to talk to my husband in the car above the engine noise, and on a coach it is impossible . . . a speech therapist has suggested that my husband learns to lip read as I cannot

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produce higher penetrating tones to overcome everyday normal noise”.

- d. “At the school Christmas party, I had to ring the school bell to obtain silence for grace before food. In PE I have begun to use a whistle for stopping and starting as it was difficult to project my voice”.

All sorts of people can put their voice under strain in all sorts of circumstances and the education profession is not alone in making punishing demands on the voice. Actors, singers, public speakers are amongst the other groups of professionals who depend totally on their voice as an essential tool of the trade. In the case of teachers, the School Teachers Pay and Conditions of Service document requires school teachers to maintain good order and discipline among pupils and to teach each of them according to their educational needs. This depends on effective classroom management, which in turn depends on creating and maintaining a well ordered, purposeful and supportive environment for the pupils to work in. Clear and effective communication with pupils is central to this. The difference between school staff and other professional voice users is that they are using their voices for practically all of the working day, rather than in short bursts.

A survey of clinics published in 2000 (Bufton) found that in 1993 – 1997 clinics had an average of 5.2 teachers on their caseload. By 1997 this had risen to 8.2 – that is, 15% of those attending voice clinics were teachers. The majority had problems arising from chronic abuse/misuse of the voice and stress; 31% had sustained damage to the vocal folds. Not all teachers who have voice problems will be seen by a voice specialist. Another survey, Russell et al (1998), found that 20% of teachers reported voice problems during the teaching year.

2003 a study into the impact of a damaged voice on a teacher’s effectiveness confirmed that any form of vocal impairment has an adverse impact on pupils’ achievement.

Some voice problems can be caused by psychological factors, particularly stress, and it is now accepted that workplace stress is a legitimate health and safety issue. Voice problems may also be caused by stress from out of school, such as a

bereavement or a similar trauma.

Despite all this, there is no mandatory requirement for teachers to receive voice training, either before qualification or in-service. This has been raised by Voice on numerous occasions. It was a topic at our 2006 National Conference.

In December 2000 the DfES and the Department of Health published “Occupational Health Guidance for the Training and Employment of Teachers”. This identified voice trauma as a potential hazard for teachers with predisposing factors being poor vocal technique, vocal strain, inadequate voice projections and inadequate breath support (see The Mechanics of the Voice). The Guidance advised that prevention of voice problems is aided by education in voice projection and vocal care. Research of teachers who have received voice training as undergraduates shows they have significantly fewer voice problems.

### The Law

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974, employers must do all that is reasonably practicable to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of their employees at work. The 1974 Act gives a number of specific examples of this general duty and these include:

- a. “the provision of such information, instruction, training and supervision as is necessary to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety at work of its employees” and;
- b. “the provision and maintenance of a working environment for its employees that is, so far as is reasonably practicable, safe without risks to health and adequate as regards facilities and arrangements for their welfare at work”.

In order to do what is reasonably practicable with regard to health, safety and welfare at work, employers must identify potential risks and hazards and take appropriate action depending on the seriousness of the risk and the precautionary measures that are available. It may be that the risk is identified as a small one and the cost of preventative measures is high. In these circumstances it would not be reasonably practicable to take those precautions, but if on the other hand the cost is reasonable given

the likely outcome of an accident or damage to health, then the preventive steps will be “reasonably practicable” and they should be taken. This is risk assessment which is now a central plank of health and safety management. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require all employees to make health and safety arrangements so that health and safety management is an equal partner in relation to all the other management systems at work. In other words, health and safety at work must not be left to chance, employers must anticipate risks and try to prevent them, rather than just react to incidents after they happen.

As well as the statutory responsibilities, employers have the common law duty of care. This requires the employer to take reasonable care to see that nothing at work causes injury or harm to employees. This is not an absolute duty and, again, there is the test of reasonableness. But if a risk is foreseeable (the employer is aware that it exists and is likely to cause injury or harm), then the employer must show that reasonable steps have been taken to address that risk.

In 2010 a 50 year old English Teacher who suffered permanent damage to her vocal chords was awarded a £145,000 out of court settlement of her personal injury claim. She had developed nodules on her vocal chords due to having to raise her voice to be heard in class at an Adult Education Centre. She had been in post since 2005 and had been given a classroom next to a courtyard used by schoolchildren during playtimes.

### **The Mechanics Of The Voice**

Voice is produced in the larynx (or voice box) which sits at the top of the trachea (or windpipe). The intricate movements of the larynx in voice production are the result of the fine balance between all the muscles of the neck, shoulders and chest. Any tension in these areas or in the jaw can upset this balance and cause the voice to become strained and hoarse.

There is limited nerve sensation in the larynx and few pain centres. Consequently, there are not normally warning signs of over-stretching the voice as there are when other parts of the body are over-stretched. An exception is laryngitis which is an inflammation of the larynx and continuing to work with the voice with laryngitis can cause long term voice damage. Damage

can take place in the larynx without the individual being aware, whereas if equivalent damage was taking place in the back, for example, there would be warning pain. The symptoms that are apparent may be described as hoarseness, a sore throat, or a more general illness such as flu or an infection.

The voice is generated by airflow and vibration. The airflow comes from the air we breathe and which is taken in through the mouth and nose and inhaled into the lungs via the trachea. As the inhaled breath returns up the trachea it meets the larynx and the closing vocal folds. This produces a vibration, and the spaces of the chest, throat, mouth and nose define the resonance of this vibration into a recognisable voice sound.

### **Risk Assessment**

Voice Care is a genuine health and safety issue and it needs to be addressed, not ignored. It should be dealt with under existing health and safety management procedures, central to which is risk assessment. The focus of risk assessment is prevention and in the case of voice care this is an extremely good example of sensible risk assessment.

There is a specimen voice care risk assessment on the Voice website ([www.voicetheunion.org.uk](http://www.voicetheunion.org.uk)) and you can also get a copy from Derby HQ.

### **The Voice Care Network UK**

The Voice Care Network UK is a national group of voice teachers and speech and language therapists. It was created in 1993 and became a registered charity in 1998. The stimulus for the work began in the 1980s when members of both disciplines discussed the high percentage of teachers receiving clinical treatment for voice disorders. Speech therapists estimated that if the teachers had understood how their voices worked, half of them could have avoided problems.

The VCN has a network of tutors who are highly experienced and most of them work in the Health Service, higher education or theatre schools. Before joining the tutor list, members attend study meetings to share ideas and develop the skills needed for specialist workshops of the highest quality.

Speech and language therapists and voice teachers work together on care of the voice, prevention of voice problems and the development of oral skills, often in the form of “extra curricular” work. They make presentations, provide workshops and voice coaching.

Schools, a number of universities and School Centred Initial Teacher Training courses use the VCN. Voice has had a close association with the VCN for a number of years and that association is highly valued. Seminars and workshops for Voice members have been very well attended and extremely well received.

## Strategies For Voice Care

### Voice Training & Advice

Only a small number of school staff receive any instruction or training on voice use, voice care, or on managing voice against noise. At a common sense level, if someone uses his/her voice a lot, it is important to be aware of how to make the very best of voice production and to be aware of potential pitfalls. Voice training can provide basic instruction on voice care and voice production. Such training will explain that voice straining and voice loss is directly related to voice misuse and the most common misuse is shouting and screaming, a strained loud voice and also throat clearing. Whilst throat clearing begins as a way of clearing mucus from the throat, if it is done excessively then it has the opposite effect and increases mucus production. This makes the vocal folds sore and inflamed. Basic voice training will indicate that the simplest alternative to potentially dangerous voice clearing is a sip of water.

So far as training about principles of voice production is concerned, this training will demonstrate that the important features are relaxation, posture, breathing, pitch and resonance.

The purpose of the training is not simply to avoid voice problems but to make the maximum use of the voice and to give the individual the maximum benefit of good voice production. This is clearly of great significance to teachers as it can enhance their classroom control, which in turn builds up confidence and reduces stress and tension.

Relevant factors for professional voice users to consider include:

- a. tension in neck and shoulders can affect the flexible larynx and distort the muscular mechanism;
- b. limited breath supply can restrict the voice, which is powered by breath;
- c. limited jaw opening or tension in the tongue or soft palate keeps resonance in the throat, and reduces the audibility and clarity of speech;
- d. lack of mobility in the face muscles and lips can reduce the visual message of words and clarity of communication;
- e. the raising of the pitch of voice to overcome ambient noise, or the lowering of the pitch to be authoritative, can both affect the long term efficiency of the vocal folds;
- f. the voice is often projected softly or unclearly where the speaker is not at ease or not confident about the ideas being communicated or is nervous about the audience or about the setting.

We firmly believe that voice training can help to:

- a. reduce time off work due to voice loss;
- b. improve confidence in the classroom and ability to communicate with pupils;
- c. reduce workloads on GPs and speech therapy clinics.

The Voice Care Network UK provides this advice on preventing voice damage:

**DO:-**

- Warm up your voice before prolonged use by humming gently or doing some vocal exercises.
- Drink plenty of water/juice, small amounts at regular intervals throughout the day.
- Ensure that the environment is well humidified (e.g. with plants or a bowl of water).
- Wherever possible adjust the environment to reduce background noise.
- Relax shoulders and neck.
- Breathe from the diaphragm.
- Wait until the class is quiet before speaking.

- > Be aware of posture when speaking. Aim for ease in alignment of the body.
- > Consider tone of voice.
- > Use a lower pitch of voice to gain children's attention, or signals such as sound (clap) or visual (raised hand). Use silence to emphasise a point or to get attention.
- > Learn to be sensitive to the first sign of vocal fatigue and take time off work if you have been diagnosed as having laryngitis.

#### **AVOID:-**

- > Smoking
- > Very hot foods and drinks. They cause dehydration and strip mucus from the throat.
- > Coughing. But if you have to cough do so as gently as possible. Instead sip water or swallow gently.
- > Speaking over noise. How can this be reduced?
- > Shouting. Children's voices are much higher pitched, so avoid trying to raise your pitch over theirs to be heard.
- > Raising your vocal volume or pitch over prolonged periods.
- > Chalk or other types of dust or fumes.
- > Stress.
- > Singing if your voice is hoarse or strained, or your throat sore.
- > Excessive use of the telephone, especially if your voice feels strained.

### **School and Personnel Management**

There are a number of practical steps that the school can take to reduce the risk of voice problems for staff. Training is one way, and at its lowest level this can include giving practical advice on classroom techniques which will help a teacher with a weak or struggling voice. For example, when talking to children try and get as close to them as possible rather than shouting over a distance and try and talk as clearly and as slowly as possible to reduce the need for loudness.

Class size, the layout of the classroom, and class discipline are three important factors that affect class noise.

There may be aspects of the school environment which are unhelpful. For example, chalk dust, fumes or irritants; and the air may be unduly oppressive and the rooms not properly ventilated. These problems should, in any event, be addressed as part of the school's premises management.

### **Amplification Systems**

Finally, a number of portable personal amplification systems are available. These are designed for people with weak or whisper voices who need to project their voices. School staff who have tested these systems have given some positive reports. We have further details available at Derby HQ.

### **Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) Benefits**

The DWP regulations allow employees who have had an accident at work to claim disablement benefit. How the accident occurred and who is responsible is irrelevant and the size of benefit depends on the extent of the injury. We have supported a number of members who have claimed a disablement benefit because they have lost their voice at work. In one case, our member's claim was turned down because the DWP said that the voice damage was caused as a result of a gradual process of wear and tear, rather than by an accident or series of accidents as the regulations require.

Our member worked in a noisy open plan infant/junior school with large classes and, like most teachers, she used her voice almost constantly. She worked in a good school with a good group of children, but it was still a great strain on her voice to make herself heard above all the surrounding noise. As well as this, she had responsibility for music in the school. Christmas was a difficult time for her and in two successive years she lost her voice temporarily after Christmas concerts.

Our member had started teaching in the early 1970s and although the importance of a teacher's voice in classroom management was stressed, she received no voice training and no advice as to the warning symptoms of voice strain either as part of her teacher

training or since starting work. In 1993, she had to leave teaching with an infirmity pension because she had lost her voice completely.

In September 1994 the DSS Appeal Tribunal accepted that the two Christmas concerts were examples of incidents of voice damage and therefore she qualified for disablement benefit. This is a weekly benefit.

Just a small amount of voice training could have saved our member's voice and her job so that she would be earning a salary instead of being unemployed. Voice therapy after the event has helped tremendously and that shows how effective voice training could have been at the outset.

## Compensation

Where it can be argued that the employer knew, or ought to have known, that there was a risk of voice damage but failed to take reasonably practicable steps to reduce or eliminate that risk, there will be a case for compensation. In particular, where a member of staff had told the employer about his/her voice difficulties and specifically asked for help and support, but without response, the employer will have difficulty in showing that reasonable steps have been taken to avoid a foreseeable risk. Our members' DSS case (see previous page) attracted a huge amount of publicity and that has made it more difficult for an employer to argue that voice damage is not a foreseeable risk and that voice care can be excluded from a school's health and safety management procedure.

We have pursued claims where members have been given no training, assistance or support.

## The Future

Like all health and safety matters in schools, the emphasis must be on prevention and we are delighted at the growing interest in voice training amongst school staff and employers, and also a growing awareness amongst the medical profession that voice abuse is a serious issue but one that can be effectively tackled by voice training and voice therapy. As well as helping an employer discharge its legal obligations, and as well as demonstrating a caring attitude, voice training makes sound economic sense. For a small investment of time and money, there can be proportionately large savings in terms of sick pay and the disruption and inconvenience of losing a teacher either temporarily or permanently.

## **Appendix**

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British Voice Association  
330 Gray's Inn Road  
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Tel: 0207 713 0064  
E-mail: [bva@dircon.co.uk](mailto:bva@dircon.co.uk)

A number of other voice trainers have also contacted Voice and if anybody requires further information, please contact HQ.

## **Priced Materials Available from Voice Care Network**

(please telephone first to check availability)  
More Care for Your Voice

Voice Warm Up Exercises  
for Professional Voice Users

Voice Care (short version)

25% reduction for ten copies or more of the above publications. P & P included.

Anatomy of Voice VHS video

OHP transparencies of cartoons in  
Care for Your Voice  
including location of network contacts

All above items are available on 01926 864000.  
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