



**AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
OTOLARYNGOLOGY-
HEAD AND NECK SURGERY**

**American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery Testimony to
the
Public Health Committee
February 6, 2009**

**In SUPPORT of RB 6265, AAC Speech and Language Pathology
Given by Debbie Osborn**

The American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery (AAO-HNS) appreciates the opportunity to comment in SUPPORT of Raised Bill 6265, AAC Speech and Language Pathology, which would modify the definition of the practice of speech and language pathology. The Academy believes the proposed revision is a good step towards clarifying the services provided by speech and language pathologists (SLPs), and that it will ensure the public is receiving a proper medical diagnosis for their communications and related health conditions.

More specifically, Raised Bill 6265 would replace “diagnosis” references within speech and language pathology’s scope of practice with the terms “evaluation” and “evaluating.” SLPs are not trained to diagnose medical or surgical conditions, and if the current law remains unchanged, patients will continue to be at risk of being surgically or medically misdiagnosed, receiving unnecessary treatments or going untreated, or being unnecessarily harmed.

Speech, voice, swallowing, and other upper aerodigestive disorders are medical conditions that require a full history and physical examination by a physician, as well as a medical diagnosis with medical or surgical management and treatment options presented and pursued by a physician. These disorders can be very serious and may be an indicator of a medically or surgically treatable condition which only a physician is medically trained and educated to identify and treat. However, the current law enables speech and language pathologists to bypass physicians by permitting them to diagnose and treat communications, swallowing, and related conditions.

While SLPs are valued health professionals who often work closely with otolaryngologist-head and neck surgeons, they should not be allowed to diagnose or determine medical treatment for patients with communications disorders. Speech and language pathologists do not possess the medical education and clinical training necessary to perform the same duties as a physician. Physicians undergo extensive education and training, not only through several years of specialized clinical training, but also through years of medical school and residency, that incorporate the importance of the treatment of the total patient. This training provides physicians with an understanding of physiologic mechanisms and the interrelation of bodily symptoms.

The AAO-HNS supports the change proposed by this bill, and in reviewing the current definition of speech and language pathology, the Academy also believes there is opportunity to further strengthen the law by replacing the term “treating” with the terms “providing therapy” or modifying it to become “non-medical or non-surgical treating.” As written, the Academy is concerned that the law could be construed as permitting speech and language pathologists to perform procedures or prescribe pharmacologic agents to patients, creating serious risks and negative outcomes. In addition, because the definition is so broad, speech and language pathologists may attempt to perform procedures beyond their education and training, including fiberoptic endoscopic evaluations of swallowing (FEES), without physician authorization or oversight. Each of the four states that specifically permit SLPs to perform FEES requires a physician referral and supervision by state law.

The AAO-HNS respectfully urges the Committee to pass Raised Bill 6265. A “yes” vote for this bill will eliminate confusion and ensure that patients are properly diagnosed for their communications disorders. Should there be the opportunity or need for further revision, we would encourage the Committee to contact the AAO-HNS or work with the leaders of our affiliated state chapter, the CT ENT Society.

For questions, you may contact Alissa Kasevich-Parady, Senior Manager of State Legislative Affairs, at 703-535-3794 or aparady@entnet.org.

The AAO-HNS represents 11,500 physicians across the United States who diagnose, treat, and manage disorders of the ears, nose, throat, and related structures of the head and neck, including nearly 175 members in Connecticut. Otolaryngologists are most commonly referred to as ear, nose, and throat specialists (ENTs) and tend to a number of ailments, including voice and swallowing disorders, hearing and balance disorders, head and neck cancer, chronic ear infection, sinusitis, snoring and sleep apnea, and facial and cranial nerve disorders. For more information, visit our website: www.entnet.org.

