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Special Considerations for the Professional Voice User

The professional voice user is any person whose voice is the primary instrument for performing his or her work. Professional voice users include singers, actors, teachers, ministers, attorneys, radio and TV personalities, auctioneers, and telemarketers, to name just a few. For these individuals, voice problems or loss of voice are devastating professionally and financially. Even a brief period of laryngitis may mean a cancelled seminar or performance and the loss of considerable income. Although vocal health is important for everyone, professional voice users have special voice needs and demands that require them to prevent vocal dysfunction.

A. Whole body health, warm-ups, and stretching. Professional voice users should be instructed to make whole body stretches and warm-ups part of their daily routine. Each day the professional can warm up the body and the voice (whether performing that day or not) with the simple protocol below: (McCorvey & Lugo, 1998; Raphael & Sataloff, 1997).

The following are usually done while standing:

- Begin warm-ups by relaxing and stretching the entire body for at least 5 minutes.
- Loosen clothing (ties, belts, etc.)
- Do full yawns.
- Gently shake the body (arms, legs, hands, etc.) for a few minutes to release tension (time is an individual preference here) until the body begins to feel loose and relaxed. Some individuals prefer to dance to music, do yoga exercises, or other similar activities.

B. Breathing and alignment exercises. The next step in the warm-up progression are breathing, body posture, and alignment maneuvers (McCorvey & Lugo, 1998; Raphael & Sataloff, 1997).

- Slowly inhale with a “softened belly” to permit an effortless inhalation, and then allow the air out again easily and gently. Place the palm on the abdomen for the first few breaths, which gives kinesthetic feedback to encourage air to move out completely with no shoulder or spinal (postural) collapse. Let the exhaled air out on a gentle, relaxing sound (“ahh”). Inhale again completely, without shoulder elevation or tension. Repeat the cycle four or five times and then allow the arms to drop to the sides and continue the relaxed inhale/exhale cycle for 2 or 3 minutes.
- Slowly and gently let the head lead and roll gently down the spine. Bend (roll) forward only as far as is comfortable. Stay in that position for a few seconds, feeling the gentle stretch of the trunk and spine as they are allowed to “go with” gravity. Slowly rebuild

posture by rolling back up the spine into an upright position. Very slowly and gently roll the head back upright until the effort “turns off” as the head is naturally aligned straight atop the spine. Repeat at least three or four times. Remain quiet, making sure to feel the moment when the effort “turns off” as the head sits in proper, comfortable alignment. Continue for at least 2 or 3 minutes.

- While seated or standing, slowly and gently let the head drop to the chest in a completely relaxed fashion (as though nodding off to sleep). Let the head relax for a 5- to 10-second count. Slowly lift the head into an upright position. Very slowly and gently bring the head back upright until the effort “turns off” as the head is naturally aligned straight atop the spine. Repeat with the head relaxed first to the right shoulder (as though pouring water from the ear), and then with the head relaxed to the left shoulder. Repeat front, right, left, several times with a gentle realignment of the head into the upright position after each position (i.e., front, upright; right, upright; left, upright) and repeat.

The point of these exercises is to warm up the body for the professional voice tasks. Tasks should be chosen that gently stretch, relax, and warm up muscles of the body, head, neck, and voice box. While it is important that the professional be physically healthy, aerobic exercises, weight lifting, and similar activities will generally not serve as effective warm-ups for the body and voice. The professional can vary breathing and alignment exercises in any manner that is comfortable but does not result in the following:

- 1) Effortful closure of the glottis including hard glottal attack. This would also include any exercise that results in grunting, groaning, or excessive vocal use (such as counting the numbers of aerobic repetitions).
- 2) Muscle strain or tension
- 3) Extreme fatigue
- 4) Excessive dryness of the mouth and throat or excessive thirst
- 5) Inhalation phonation
- 6) Talking over background noise
- 7) Loud laughing
- 8) Throat clearing or coughing

C. Vocal warm-ups and stretching. These should be a part of the professional’s daily routine. For the most effective results, the professional should do warm-up routines (including the body and breathing exercises discussed earlier) for at least 20 minutes or more before each rehearsal and performance. General vocal health will likely be improved if these activities are done daily.

Warm-ups are always started in the relaxed, most comfortable midrange of the professional’s voice.

- 1) Start the vocals with something like tongue trills (raspberries), lip trills (Bronx cheers), or humming. All of these types of phonation place the attention and emphasis in the front of the face and lift the voice off of the larynx. This is sometimes referred to as tone focus or

forward focus as opposed to back focus. A back-focused voice (effort directly on the larynx) quickly results in laryngeal fatigue and strain.

- 2) Chant or sing the word “hmm” at a comfortable pitch and loudness level in the middle of the range. Make this phonation light and airy (like a sigh). Make sure to start with a very breathy “h” in “hum,” as that allows the vocal folds to turn on through a soft, airy voiceless breath, followed by the “mmm” that can easily be felt in the facial mask. Hold the word “hum” for several seconds, feeling the vibrations of the “mmm” in the facial mask. Repeat three to five times, letting the voice swell gently with each successive “hum.”
- 3) Maintain the lightness and forward focus on the “hum” and slide the “hum” up to a second note (no higher than four or five notes) and back to the first. Slide the “hum” up a full octave and back to the first note. Repeat three to five times.
- 4) Repeat the “hum” while sliding down to a second note (no lower than four or five notes) and back to the first. Slide the “hum” down a whole octave and back to the original note. Repeat several times.
- 5) Slide up an octave using first /a/, then /i/, then /u/. Then go up the octave step by step, using each of the same vowels preceded by /o/. Go up the octave step by step again, this time using each of the vowels preceded by /m/. Repeat going down an octave rather than up, using the same procedure.
- 6) Go up the octave step by step, using each of the same vowels (/a/, /i/, /u/) preceded by /j/. Go down an octave step by step using each of the same vowels preceded by /j/. Exaggerate and feel the related jaw opening and closing (like chewing the tones) as you sing /ja/, /ji/, or /ju/. Repeat several times.
- 7) Warm up the articulators using tongue twisters. These will loosen up the articulators and the brain. There are many books of tongue twisters available in print, as well as on the World Wide Web.
 - “A big black bug bit a big black bear and made the big black bear bleed blood”
 - “A Tudor who toots the flute tried to tutor two tooters to toot”
 - “Old oily Ollie oils old oily autos”
 - “Lily ladles little Letty’s lentil soup” (Staley, 1999)
- 8) Using as many vowels and consonants as possible, sing (or say, or chant) a series of relaxed scales with a consonant preceding a vowel. For example, sing “/mi/” up the scale one step at a time, and back down the scale one step at a time (1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1). Use consonants that vary place of articulation, such as bilabials (/p/, /b/, /m/), labiodentals (/th/, /f/, /v/), velars (/k/, /g/), and so on, and varying vowels, such as front (/ee/, /aa/), back (/oo/, /uh/), and so on. Extend the scales beyond one octave as level of comfort permits. Extending beyond one octave may be necessary for a professional

singer but not for a professional speaker. The decision of whether to extend the voice through its entire range should be based on the patient's comfort level and her or his professional voice requirements.

- 9) Sing another series of the scales listed in the previous passage, but with the vocal effort cut in half and with no whispering or voicelessness. Try to cut the vocal effort in half again.

- 10) Finally, gradually increase the loudness and fullness of the sounds from section (8) above. Vocalize the entire range of the voice using relaxed, full resonance. Check for vibrations in the facial mask periodically to be sure that the tone is staying forward and focused.

*A routine can be varied to meet the individual needs of any performer. Professionals should stop and take a break anytime they feel tired or the voice feels strained. For the most effective results, the patient should be instructed to break during the warm-up exercises after about each 5 to 10 minutes of activity. At each break the professional should walk around, stretch, and get a drink of water so that the voice is well hydrated before actually beginning a demanding vocal task (McCorvey & Lugo, 1998). **The performer should remember to drink a minimum of eight glasses of water a day to maintain hydration.***

PLEASE CONTACT YOUR SPEECH PATHOLOGIST IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS.