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Interview between Petrie Hosken and Philip Gerrard

Petrie: The papers today are talking about a mask muddle, so I want to hear what *you* know, what you're supposed to do today, with regards to wearing masks. Is it really, actually, quite simple? 0800 731 2000.

Now, if you're deaf, or hard of hearing, and used to lipreading and taking facial cues, really, how are you supposed to understand somebody wearing a face covering. Well, charities for deaf people are calling on *everyone* to wear see-through masks, which would make lipreading possible. I've been sort of fascinated by these masks since I first saw them, earlier on this week. And, it also has the added advantage of each of us being able to take facial cues, so we can see people smiling, we can see when they start speaking, it's altogether, it seems, far more friendly.

Well, I'm joined now by Philip Gerrard, CEO of Deaf Action, who is deaf himself. So, I'm explaining this to you. The voice you'll hear speaking to *me*, is his interpreter, Yvonne Waddell, who's using sign language for this interview. So she's signing to him, he's replying to her, and she is speaking to me. So there will be some delay in response to questions. So I just wanted to explain that to you.

Good morning both of you!

Philip: Good morning!

Petrie: How... this has really troubled me, from day one, is the covering of people's faces for deaf people. How life changing is the new mask rule for people who can't hear?

Philip: So, you're right Petrie, it's life changing for us, you know, as deaf people. And so, it's a sudden thing, you know? Just going to a shop, and doing your normal everyday shopping, buying your essentials, bread, milk, you know, something that should be just a small everyday task, has become very different. You go in to the shop, everybody has their face covered, as you say, you are not seeing any of those facial cues, you can't see the mouth or the lip pattern, and it's a huge communication barrier for people, as soon as they go in! And so, people are very reluctant to even go onto public transport, like they normally would, you know, getting on busses, trains... so it's really affected even these everyday tasks for deaf people.

Petrie: It must be incredibly isolating. So not just physically difficult to carry out those tasks, but emotionally very difficult.

Philip: Absolutely. Absolutely. You know, I can say from myself, as a deaf person, I've been talking to many other deaf people, you know, people in our community, and I see that people are avoiding going out. You know, so as you say, being more isolated, because they're saying 'I'm just going to stay home more'. So even now that lockdown restrictions are eased, and they *can* go out, they're choosing not to. And so, the concern then is the mental wellbeing is going to be even more affected.

You know, we *knew* there were issues within deaf community, that they suffered from worse mental wellbeing, but this has just been exacerbated by this pandemic.

Petrie: And of course, when we talk about the deaf, we're not just talking about one particular age group, are we? This spans generations. And the elderly, of course, whilst not being deaf, may be in their own regard, hard of hearing or losing that hearing. So this is important for them, too!

Philip: Yes, absolutely Petrie. You know, it's not just one small group; the largest group of people who have hearing loss, is actually elderly people. You know, and so maybe they don't hear well, they don't hear perfectly well, they may already be struggling with their hearing, so they're not necessarily fully deaf, but that's going to affect people as well. And they'll even become more isolated. You know, and I have to say I'm already hearing from people, you know, people like yourselves who are going to shops and are seeing people wearing masks, and you have screens on... and if you are wearing a mask and the cashier is wearing a mask, you know, the voice is muffled, as well. The quality of voice, when you are struggling to hear, is affected by the wearing of masks.

Petrie: Oh absolutely! It's bad for the hearing people: I can't hear what people say, I can't take their facial cues either. So it's quite isolating for *all* of us, but particularly bad for people who have hearing problems. But, it's not good for society as a whole anyway. How much difference would it make if the masks were see-through? Let me just explain. These are masks with a panel, a see-through panel over the mouth. Would that make a difference? How much difference?

Philip: Yes, it really would make a big difference if people could wear these kind of masks. We've been wearing clear masks, here at Deaf Action, we've been testing them with deaf people in our community. The reaction that we get is very different, when you can see someone's mouth! And it's just those, you know, simple expressions that make such a difference, to be able to do that. It's a really positive difference.

Petrie: I mean, we take in something like in the high 80s or... percentage of our cues visually, in terms of people's response to us?

Philip: Yes, that's it! we all use is body language, facial expression, facial movements, gestures; that's all part of the communication.

Petrie: So how much support is there for this campaign. Like I said, I've been absolutely insistent that I spoke to you guys today, on this issue, because I just felt it was so important to do it!

Philip: Thank you for having us on and thank you for your support! Because it is all about raising awareness and that's the kind of thing that we really appreciate. I think there's been a lot of positive support, from the public, and from the governments, both UK and Scottish governments, we have had support from. There's been parliament[ary question]s raised both in Scottish parliament and in Westminster. But what I *would* really like to see more, and more of, is our MSPs, our MPs, our

Minsters, you know, people in the public eye themselves, leading by example. You know, if someone like that had clear, see-through masks with a window on, or one that they can see through, then people will realise that it's available, and that there's an alternative solution there. So I think people just don't know.

Petrie: And that *is* the point actually! And I *do* want to wear one of these masks, because it's important for me, and it's important that people don't feel isolated, and it's important that I see other people smile, or *not*, at me. But that... where do I get it from? Is it going to cost me more? All these things, we need to have out in the public.

Philip: And so, that's part of our campaign as well, and that's been a little bit of a challenge, if I'm honest. There are companies out there, who are making them; there's a lot of people who've been handmaking these kinds of masks, because they realised there's a market for them. So there's kind of small-scale suppliers. And I think in the next month or two, we're going to see even more companies offering this, and it should become part of the norm. We're pushing that.

Petrie: And so, if we were all to wear these masks, we've now got to wear them anyway, if we're now all to wear them, what kind of difference would that make?

Philip: Well, if you can imagine *everybody's* wearing them, you know, and if that became the norm, that you have to wear one with a window, then people would become a little bit more friendly, I think? It's going to help that rapport between people, because it's actually quite scary, communicating with everybody in their mask. You've already said that yourself: you want to see people smile, or if they're not smiling, you want to know that! So all that's really important. And everybody wins. It's not just deaf people, everybody wins from this.

Petrie: And of course, as we were saying Philip, that that will help age groups, you know, like you said the elderly who are starting to lose their hearing, or they may find it a bit difficult, or even with children, who must be quite scared of masks at the moment!

Philip: I think it can be anxiety inducing, for a lot of children. You know, I know a lot of deaf teenagers, as well, who are out there, who are usually pretty confident to be out in their group, and go different places, are actually staying at home because they think "I'm not going to be able to cope with this, this is just going to be hard, I'm too embarrassed to then say 'I don't understand you'". So it's having a real dent on their confidence. So absolutely, all age groups are affected.

Petrie: It has been an enormous pleasure to talk to you this morning Philip, thank you so much for joining us this morning, and I wish you well and I will be doing my bit. I'll get one of these masks, I'll put a photograph on, not that I'm a celebrity, but I can do my bit to help. And just get that information out there. Philip Gerrard, CEO of Deaf Action, thank you, very much indeed, this morning.

Philip: Thank you!

Petrie: And Yvonne, of course, I'd like to thank you as well, Yvonne Waddell, who's been using sign language to communicate with Philip and was his voice. So thank you very much indeed to both of you this morning.

So there *is* an alternative to this sort of covering our faces and not being able to see each other smile! And for me, that is so important! Face masks are just so isolating, for everybody, aren't they, we can't talk properly, we can't see each other, we don't know who's smiling, who's grimacing, we take those cues that are vitally important to us as human beings. So there is an alternative!

And these are the masks that have a panel in them, a see-through panel where the deaf or the hearing or everybody can see our mouths. So it's less isolating, less scary for children, and better for the deaf, the elderly, who are maybe losing their hearing, so there *is* an alternative to that. Just that mask that you shove on when you go to the shops. So please, have a look at those and see what you think.

0800-731 2000 – taking your calls this morning on masks, you have to wear them today, in shops, in shopping centres that are enclosed, banks, building societies, post offices, stations, bus stations, and airports. And of course you already have to wear it on public transport. So, those are the places you have to wear them. Are you heading out with your mask in hand today?