

SUNDAY

SEPTEMBER 29, 2002

SECTION **M**

Another reason
to shop

Hydrotherapy
machines are
soothing weary
mall-goers.

Page M-5

The Providence Sunday Journal

HEALTH & FITNESS MONTHLY



STOCKBYTE/ PICTUREQUEST

AT A LOSS FOR WORDS

Doctor, I can't see what you're saying

BY VICTORIA L. WILCOX
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

After Alice Rodrigues, of Somerset, had shoulder surgery last year, she had to bang on the walls of the recovery room to summon a nurse. She needed medicine to relieve her pain, but without a sign-language interpreter, she could only pound and wait.

Like Rodrigues, more than 86,000 Rhode Islanders hear poorly or not at all. Yet, 12

years after passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, they still face "tremendous barriers" to getting the accommodations they need to communicate with health-care providers, according to Jeanne Panarace, manager of Disability and Health Programs for the state Department of Health.

Rodrigues talks with her hands, using American Sign Language to chat with friends. Her teletype device, or TTY, lets her send and receive written messages by telephone. A relay service enables her to converse with people who lack TTYs. Their words, typed by an operator, appear on a screen.

Rodrigues reads lips, too. Yet, she feels her primary-care doctor doesn't "even try for conversation." Maria Okwara, president of the Rhode Island Association of the Deaf, says some health-care providers grow impatient with the time and effort needed to communicate.

This wall of silence deprives patients of vital information. According to Dr. Raymond Mis, a Warwick gastroenterology and liver-disease specialist, if the patient doesn't understand what the doctor says, "that whole visit is worthless."

He should know: Mis, who is legally blind and hard of hearing, wears hearing aids. He warns that when patients don't hear the questions, doctors may not get correct answers and could arrive at the wrong diagnosis.

SEE **DEAF, M-3**



JOURNAL PHOTO / KRIS CRAIG

ALICE RODRIGUES

The author, Victoria L. Wilcox, has a doctorate in medical psychology and is on the Governor's Commission on Disabilities.