Hearing and Learning Disabilities

A significant number of people with a learning disability have a hearing loss, but few actually have their hearing tested. Siobhan Brennan, Clinical Scientist at Sheffield Hearing and Learning Impairment Service and Chair of Hearing and Learning Disabilities Group (HALD) describes what professionals are doing to address this situation.

Hearing offers us so much; enjoyment of music, communication with people and awareness of our environment. Life can be dramatically affected by sensory problems affecting adults and children, their families and carers. If someone has a hearing loss, there are lots of ways that Audiology can help.

Studies

Studies have found around 30% - 40% of people with a learning disability have a hearing loss. For this reason lots of departments round the country now offer specialist Audiology services for people with a learning disability. In these clinics the Audiologist has more time to spend with clients, uses specialist equipment and can provide easy read information about hearing tests and using hearing aids. Many services offer a range of staff in Audiology including Speech and Language Therapists, Clinical Scientists and Doctors who specialise in hearing.

Hearing Tests

We know from the small number of adults with learning disabilities attending Audiology Services around the UK that very few people with hearing loss and learning disabilities have recently had their hearing tested. So we think a lot of people with learning disabilities have a hearing loss without realising that they do.

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Ear wax often prevents a lot of hearing tests being carried out, so it is worth seeing the a GP to make sure that ears are clear before seeing an Audiologist. If the GP is unable to do this, either the GP or Audiologist can refer to the Ear Nose and Throat department to have the wax removed.

Having a hearing test can be a lot of fun and there are lots of different tests that can be used. Sometimes the sounds will come from a speaker or headphones and the client would be asked to press a button or put pegs in a box when the sounds are there. Other tests involve listening to words and finding the correct pictures. There are also tests of hearing that we can do for which clients don’t need to do anything at all. The tests are all explained as we go along and often we don’t do everything in one appointment, we’ll take it at the client’s pace. If clients are nervous about visiting a hospital they can usually visit us before on a different day to their appointment to get to know us and the department. Some centres also offer home visits.

When people have been fitted with hearing aids after a long period of not hearing we have had a wide range of reactions including surprise, laughter and singing!

HALD
The Hearing and Learning Disabilities (HALD) group is a group of professionals with an interest in the hearing needs of adults with learning disabilities. The membership is from a range of backgrounds including Audiology, Speech and Language Therapy, Hearing Therapy, Audiological Medicine, Community Nursing and Social Care. This group works to improve not only the quality of care in Audiology clinics, but also access to Audiology, and support for clients and carers after a hearing loss is identified. We meet every 6 months at different places around the country to include as many people as possible. Each meeting includes presentations and discussion sessions about a different aspect of hearing management for adults with learning disabilities. Previous meetings have included “Tinnitus Identification and Management for Adults with Learning Disabilities”, “Hearing Aid Fitting for Adults with Learning Disabilities” and “Access to Audiology Services”. There are also working groups who try to answer specific questions, such as the best way to provide hearing tests and amplification for adults who don’t like to have their ears touched.

We now have a website with some resources: www.hald.org.uk.

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