# Podcast 3: Supporting an Adult with Complex Needs at an Eye Examination

Voiceover: This podcast is brought to you by the RNIB Older People and Complex Needs team.

June: I’m June Neill and I’m part of the RNIB Older People and Complex Needs team and today we thought we’d shake it up a wee bit and instead of having Marion interviewing us, I thought I would have a chat with Iain around about supporting people with complex needs and why it’s really important for them to access eye health care. So, Iain, start us off! Why is it really important for people with learning disabilities to access eye health care?

Iain: Well, the prevalence figures are out there for people with learning disabilities - there’s over a million people in the UK that are recorded as having a learning disability – I think that figure’s massively underestimated but that’s what the figures are showing. And I think of sight loss – people with learning disabilities are ten times more likely to have significant sight problems.

June: And do you think that people are well aware that adults with learning disabilities are ten times more likely to be living with sight loss?

Iain: No, absolutely not. I think what often happens is, sight loss is often masked for people with learning disabilities so there’s a kind of diagnostic over-shadowing – they’ve got a learning disability and then, a lot of the behaviours and mannerisms that could be related to sight loss are often hidden and put in a kind of ‘learning disability box.’ So I think a lot of times, particularly for those people with learning disabilities who have maybe limited communication, maybe limited verbal communication, the way that they try and communicate that they have sight loss, is through behaviours, mannerisms, etc. and those behaviours and mannerisms are often considered to be part of the person’s learning disability rather than potential other health needs.

June: So, it’s really important for people to access eye health care. Do you feel that people are accessing eye health care and, if not, why not?

Iain: I think recently there’s been a massive change as social services have moved from the old institution-type services and into community care and individualised care packages, people are getting access to eye health care more regularly. I think what could be improved is, kind of, staff’s understanding of the impact of sight loss and the questions to ask as part of the eye examination process so that they can get the most out of the eye examination and then take that back to services so that they can then better support that person so, yeah, people are getting to access the eye health services in a timely fashion but I would love for more information to be going back to the support services.

June: And do adults with learning disabilities go to their local optometrist or do they have to go to a specialist eye health check?

Iain: Well, it’s a bit of myth, I suppose, a myth-buster coming up! People with learning disabilities and complex needs can absolutely access your local high street optometrist. There might be a few tweaks and changes that might need to be put into place but they don’t have to be seen by a specialist optician or they don’t have to go to the eye hospital. So, with a wee bit of preparation, you can absolutely access your local high-street opticians.

June: And you were talking earlier, Iain, about, like, sight loss being masked or diagnostic over-shadowing. So, what sort of things should support staff or parents be looking at for signs of sight loss?

Iain: One of the obvious things, and I say obvious because I’m kind of, coming from this line of work: clumsiness. Maybe knocking things over, or kind of, banging into objects, is often a sign that somebody may not be able to see them but because they’ve potentially got a learning disability, that’s: ‘Oh, they’re clumsy because they’ve got a learning disability.’ So, knocking objects over, maybe reaching for things and not quite getting them, kind of, under-reaching or over-reaching. Things like repetitive movements or behaviours might be a kind of, indication of them utilising their remaining vision rather than something that may be seen as a challenging behaviour – but often that’s linked to the sight loss.

June: Right, so Iain, how often should an adult with learning disabilities be accessing eye health care?

Iain: Exactly the same as the general population: at least every two years, sometimes because of the higher prevalence of sight loss and learning disabilities, they may have to access it more often, every year, every six months; if they’ve got a pre-existing eye condition.

June: And, glasses, any particular information we should know about glasses for adults with learning disabilities? I’m particularly thinking: should adults with learning disabilities be wearing glasses? Do they wear them more often?

Iain: Um, yeah, I mean, there’s loads of information. So, first of all, if it’s going to improve their vision, absolutely. Glasses should be dispensed and tried. I’ve come across, worked with, a lot of people in the past that don’t quite get on with glasses straight away. Think about it as a kind of, strange object placed on top of somebody’s face and it changes the way they’re used to seeing the world. So it might be that glasses need to be introduced in a more gradual way and t might be over a period of months or even years so they can get used to having something, first of all, on their face. It might also be that stepped or staged prescriptions are introduced so that full correction isn’t given to the person straight away. You could also look at multiple pairs of glasses rather than having bi-focals or vari-focals; you could have a pair of glasses for near tasks and a pair of glasses for distance tasks. But I think, where possible, glasses should be encouraged. But I think also there comes a point where, if the person isn’t going to tolerate glasses, then we’ve got to understand what that person can see without correction and then we build a care package around that rather than forcing people day after day after day, week after week, to try and wear glasses if they’re not going to get on with that, with the glasses. We need to move on and support them with what vision they have.

June: Absolutely. And I do know that for some people you can get all different types of frames. So you can have Erin's frames that are maybe a bit more suitable for people that have a flat bridge?

Iain: Yeah, so there’s loads, Erin's frames or tomato frames for children. I think getting glasses fitted is so, so important so I think making sure that they’re comfy. One of the main reasons that I’ve come across for people with learning disabilities not wearing their glasses is because they’ve been poorly fitted or the shape of the glasses has changed once they’ve brought them home. So they’ve taken them off their face and kind of, bent them themselves and things like that. Or they’ve been pushed in a drawer and brought out later on and changed shape. They can be sometimes uncomfortable. So, support staff should always be looking out for, kind of, red marks of the bridge of the nose or the backs of the ears and going back to the optician; asking for them to be re-fitted.

June: So, it sounds as if, Iain, for adults with learning disabilities, they should be accessing eye health care. And once they’ve accessed eye health care, there is lots of alternatives that people can do to make the most out of their vision?

Iain: Yeah, absolutely. Everybody should be accessing eye health care. It’s about grabbing the information that the optician gives you, taking that information back to your support services and sharing that information about what the person can and cannot see and then adapting your support accordingly.

June: And I know that you have produced a healthy eyes pack and that’s like a trainer’s pack?

Iain: Yeah, so there’s a number of resources we’ve got within the Older People and Complex Needs team. There’s a healthy eyes pack, which is actually designed for people with learning disabilities to have a, kind of, greater understanding of the impact of sight loss and how important eye health is. And that could be facilitated by an individual with learning disabilities themselves, or a staff member. We also have a number of training packages and vision champion courses and things like that, that helps support the staff member around understanding and recognising signs of potential sight loss.

June: So, really, eye health care is for everybody?

Iain: Absolutely.

June: Absolutely. Well, thanks, Iain, it was lovely to chat to you today and I’m going to hand you back to Marion who will be doing our next podcast in our ‘Supporting…’ series.

Voiceover: If you found this helpful, listen to our other podcasts. We also have further information online from our sight loss advice service at rnib.org.uk/advice. You can also call the RNIB Helpline on 0303 123 9999. We are the Older People and Complex Needs team at RNIB. For more information about what we do, search for us on the RNIB website.

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