

Are You Deaf Aware?

During the BISWG 2010 Legal Seminar many people admired the work of our two British Sign Language interpreters. I thought it would be a good time to review and update the article I wrote in 2008 about deaf awareness. CMSUK members can find the original article in Newsletter No 1 on their website www.cmsuk.org.

Of course, there may be many other communication issues in working with clients with Brain Injuries, but I hope you will find this helpful. Kim Russell (Oct 2010).

ARE YOU DEAF AWARE?

Have you met any deaf people in the course of your work? If not, then the chances are that you soon will. Did you know that approximately one in seven of the population is affected by deafness? A client who happens to be deaf may be referred to you, or a member of his/her family could be deaf.

This article is based on my own experience and training, which I hope will help Case Managers, Social Workers and other members of BISWG Ltd who meet deaf people in the course of their work.

Types of deafness you may encounter:

- Born deaf or became deaf before learning verbal communication.
- Became deaf suddenly as a result of accident or illness after acquiring speech.
- Deafness as a result of older age. Could be anywhere on a continuum from slight to severe loss.
- Deaf Blind. May have some sight and/or hearing but registered deaf/blind.

People who are born deaf may describe themselves as **Deaf**. They have their own culture and may use BSL as their first language. They may not consider themselves disabled. They may have limited speech and may not be able to read and write English.

People with sudden onset deafness may prefer to continue to use their voice, even if they can't hear themselves. They may lip read and may have good written English skills.

Age related deafness may have come on slowly and the person may find this hard to accept. People affected by this type of deafness are less likely to use BSL and may not be able to lip read very well. They may be able to understand written communications better, but their eyesight may be deteriorating as they get older.

Deaf Blind people have to cope with two disabilities. Deaf Blind people may have some sight and/or hearing rather than have total sight or hearing loss.

Initial Contact:

In contacting deaf people there are a few things you need to consider. To state the obvious, they may not respond to a telephone message. They may not respond to a letter either, particularly if it seems complicated - more about that later.

My advice is to use whatever information is available: Who has already had contact? What did they do? What problems did they encounter? Ask the referrer and use their experience as your starting point. If they had problems, try to learn from these.

Maybe initial contact needs to be via a friend or relative, but in the longer term you need to find a way to communicate directly with the client. Try text messaging, fax, a simple letter or e-mail using plain English. The deaf person may use a textphone (sometimes called a Minicom), and this could be used with Text Relay which provides a text-to-voice and voice-to-text translation service.

To some extent you can treat BSL users as any 'foreign' language speaker. Do you need an interpreter? If you are writing letters remember that English may not be their first language. Keep it simple. *Also, for the same reasons, writing notes during a meeting may not actually help much.*

Face to Face Communication:

Do you need to book an interpreter? Try not to use a family member as some issues may be too personal.

Some people use Lip Speakers, who help by enunciating the words clearly, but without using their voice, to help the person lip read. The client may want to use a note-taker instead, or just have somebody with them in case they miss anything.

- Ask the person where you should sit. You may need to be clearly visible (in good light) so that they can see your mouth and facial expressions.
- Speak clearly, but don't speak too slowly and don't raise your voice.
- Keep your hands away from your mouth, the deaf person may want to lip read.
- Avoid 'loud' clothing, jangly earrings, spectacles on the top of your head. Men - facial hair may cause problems. All of these can cause distractions and make it difficult to concentrate.

If using an interpreter, **don't talk to the interpreter**, talk to the client.

Some More Things to Consider:

Hearing aids don't help everyone. They amplify everything and you don't get 'normal' sound. Some people prefer not to use them.

You may need to book an interpreter well in advance. There just aren't enough around.

Don't assume your client will use BSL, most people don't.

Is deafness related to a Personal Injury claim? Do you need to include interpreting costs in your recommendations? Could counselling help with the adjustment?

Is deafness something that the person has been managing for years? They may not consider it to be a major problem, as they may have adjusted to it. **But**, their new injury may make things different, e.g. a newly tetraplaegic BSL user who can no longer use his hands for signing.

Is the deaf person claiming Disability Living Allowance?

Does your client know how to contact the Emergency Services? Or roadside assistance?

Text Relay will enable you to communicate with a deaf client by telephone if they have equipment at home. You speak via an operator who types a message to them and relays their typed response verbally to you. Do you need to help your client acquire the necessary equipment?

YOU ALREADY KNOW SOME SIGN LANGUAGE – SO USE IT:

Use your fingers for numbers 1 - 10.

There are basic signs in common usage - mime writing a note, drinking tea - you will be understood.

Wave 'Hello' and 'Goodbye'.

Use facial expressions - happy, depressed, etc.

During Your Visit:

Be prepared to write notes, but don't assume that this method will be effective. If the person uses BSL as their first language they may have problems with reading and writing English grammar. Many deaf people can't spell well and quite a number have dyslexia.

Some Suggestions to Aid Follow Up and Next Contact:

Follow up in writing - but remember to keep to simple, plain English if you have established that English is not the client's first language.

Consider leaving them a compliments slip which says something like this: *'Please call my Case Manager ..(name).. on ..(number).. to arrange an appointment. I will need an interpreter present'*. It may help them to arrange contact with you.

As usual in Social Work and Case Management the best approach is to be open and honest - let the client tell you what they need, and think creatively to facilitate it.

Here are some suggestions and contacts you might find useful.

Communication Aids:

- People - interpreters, lip speakers, note takers, interpreter guides (for deaf/blind).
- Animals - Hearing Dogs for the Deaf.
- Equipment - flashing or vibrating alarms (smoke detectors, door bells, alarm clocks). Loop system.
- Communication Technology - fax, e-mail, text messaging, Text Relay.

Access to Aids, Equipment and Services

- Royal National Institute for Deaf people (RNID) <http://www.rnid.org.uk>
- Signature promotes excellence in communication with deaf people, including information about BSL courses <http://www.signature.org.uk>
- Hearing Dogs for the Deaf <http://www.hearingdogs.org.uk/>
- Social Services - Hearing Impairment Team.
- Text Relay <http://www.textrelay.org/> or <http://www.textrelay.org/files/Typetalkleafletv7.pdf> for a more detailed document which includes guidance for hearing users and textphone users.
- Royal Association for Deaf people (RAD) <http://www.royaldeaf.org.uk/>
- Booking Interpreters. There are lots of websites offering this service. Try Googling 'BSL Interpreter' and the area, or ask your client how they usual book an interpreter.

KYR 1.10.10