

# Disabled people's health issues fall on deaf ears

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At least forty per cent of UK people with learning disabilities are suffering from hearing loss, but new research shows they are unlikely to be diagnosed.

The research [hearing loss](#) in people with learning disabilities, by Lynzee McShea, who is studying a professional doctorate at the University of Sunderland, focuses on the current issues people with learning disabilities (PWLD) are facing and why they are left undiagnosed in the long-term.

The report, published in the British Journal of Healthcare Assistants, says PWLD are more likely to have hearing loss than the general population but are less likely to have this diagnosed and managed with hearing aids. This is mainly because hearing loss diagnosis relies on self-referral, which is an initial barrier for PWLD, who may not have the awareness that they have a hearing loss, or the communication skills to alert others to this.

However, initial referral is just one small part of the process. Barriers can also be found during the hearing assessment and in after care, following hearing aid fitting.

Carers and support workers also need to receive a better education because those with learning disabilities often rely on them for detection and management of hearing loss, the report urges.

Lynzee McShea, a senior clinical scientist in audiology at Sunderland Royal Hospital, claims more than 90 per cent of people with learning disabilities she has assessed have been diagnosed with hearing loss, despite fewer than 10 per cent of carers having any concerns regarding hearing prior to the consultation.

Lynzee, said: "Healthcare professionals rely on family carers and paid support workers to detect [hearing problems](#), support the individual to attend an assessment and to then ensure consistent [hearing aid](#) use and aftercare. This is a big ask and our research suggests most carers and support workers do not yet have the necessary skills to do this optimally."

The University of Sunderland and Lynzee are now working with support workers to design training programmes to increase their knowledge of hearing loss and raise awareness of the benefit hearing aids can bring.

Lynzee added: "Better hearing can improve the quality of life significantly and we have powerful evidence of the difference hearing aids can make in the lives of individuals with learning disabilities. The next phase of the research involves working in collaboration with support workers, using their ideas and feedback, to design a training programme that enhances their knowledge and allows them to make a difference in their working practice."

However, even if a carer does suspect the possibility of hearing loss, barriers remain because hearing loss is not seen as a priority by GPs compared to other health problems. The report also says there are often misconceptions that people

with learning [disabilities](#) cannot have their hearing tested or will not tolerate hearing aids. With at least 40 per cent of PWLD thought to have a hearing loss, this equates to hundreds of thousands of individuals in the UK with unmet needs.

Provided by University of Sunderland

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