

## **Guide Dogs' prescription to GP surgeries**

### **Enhancing care provision for blind and partially sighted people in GP surgeries: Guidelines for Best Practice.**

DOCTORS' surgeries are being prescribed some important health checks by The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, after a survey revealed more than a third of visually impaired people feel their GP is not fully aware of their needs.

The charity is to launch Guidelines for Best Practice, setting out minimum standards and guidelines for General Practitioners. The emphasis is about ensuring that the policies and practices of surgeries take full account of the needs of people with a visual impairment, thus creating a more inclusive environment for all their patients.

Guide Dogs first highlighted the concerns of visually impaired patients in its report - The Experiences of Visually Impaired Users of the NHS – published in 2004. The research, based on a survey of guide dog owners and other blind and partially sighted people, identified areas of exclusion from three key sectors of care delivery in the NHS:

- GP care
- Outpatient care
- Inpatient care.

A sizeable minority of patients had unsatisfactory experiences in these sectors. As a follow up to this research, Guide Dogs conducted pan-disability audits in 27 randomly selected doctors' surgeries across the UK, between May and September 2004.

The purpose of these audits was to substantiate the findings of the survey, and ascertain the degree to which services on the ground could be made more accessible to people with disabilities in general and, in particular, people with a visual impairment.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) requires providers of services and facilities to make 'reasonable adjustments' in order to ensure access for all users. In Section 21 in particular, the Act focuses on information provision as well as practices, policies, and the physical environment.

The question that must now be addressed by providers of health care is how to bring their services in line with the requirements of the DDA and the provisions of a 21st century health service. This will include a review of, and where necessary, adjustment to those surgery-based policies and practices that underpin the day-to-day delivery of care, to reflect the principle and practice of inclusion.

Guide Dogs' new publication – Enhancing Care Provision for Blind and Partially Sighted People in GP Surgeries: Guidelines for Best Practice – sets out minimum standards and guidelines for GPs' premises. The aim is to ensure that their policies and practices take full account of the needs of people with a visual impairment, thus creating a more inclusive environment for all their patients.

Three key areas are the focus of these guidelines:

- Communication and information
- Staff training
- The physical environment: internal and external

Bridget Warr, Chief Executive of Guide Dogs explains: “Our hope is that these guidelines will support the nation-wide commitment to end the injustice of health inequalities by creating environments of care delivery in which no user feels diminished.”

Surgeries are encouraged to:

- Identify all patients with a visual impairment and ask them how staff can provide effective support during surgery visits.
- Ensure that all staff receive regular training on disability awareness issues.
- Develop a flagging system on patients' notes to alert staff that a patient may require assistance.
- Identify the preferred format of communication for all blind and partially sighted patients and ensure that all correspondence is sent out to them in this format.
- Regularly maintain entrances to the surgery, ensuring that routes remain free of obstructions.
- Ensure that all signage is in the recommended format, size and positioned at a convenient height to be easily read by partially sighted patients.

The charity is launching its guidelines at events in London and Edinburgh during February and March.

Senior NHS managers from a range of disciplines, as well as general practitioners, have been invited to a seminar entitled Access to the NHS for Blind and Partially Sighted People. Hosted by the charity, the event takes place at the Lilian Baylis Theatre, Sadler's Wells, London on Wednesday, 16 February.

Speakers include Dr Femi Nzegwu, author of Guidelines for Best Practice, and The Experiences of Visually Impaired Users of the NHS. She will discuss practical ways to promote equality of access to GP surgeries for visually impaired people.

Barbara Stephens, Chair of NHSU, will speak on how the NHS plans to deliver a better service for disabled patients by raising the standard of disability and equality training for staff at all levels.

With Dr Charles Sears MRCGP, Chair of the Disability Task Group at the Royal College of GPs, presenting how the Royal College is tackling issues of access to primary health care for visually impaired people and other disabled patients.

Gary Belfield, Head of Primary Care at the Department of Health, has also been invited to discuss how the roll out of the NHS Plan is helping to create a more adaptable and personalised National Health Service. The seminar will be chaired by Bridget Warr, Chief Executive of Guide Dogs.

In Scotland, Lord James Douglas-Hamilton will also be hosting a reception at the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh on Thursday, 3 March, to mark the launch of the guidelines north of the border. Rhona Brankin MSP, Deputy Health Minister, and Ruth Wallace, Head of the Royal College of General Practitioners Scotland, have been invited to speak at the event. MSPs and health professionals will be in attendance.

The importance that the charity's initiative will have for blind and partially sighted people using GP surgeries and the NHS cannot be understated. As Guide Dogs' Chief Executive Bridget Warr emphasises:

"There are over a million blind and partially sighted people in the UK; 90% of these are over 60. Moreover, demographic trends indicate that the number of people in the UK aged over 80 is set to increase by half in the next 20 years.

"The NHS must ensure its services are accessible to those people who need them most – now and in the future. Therefore our guidelines are as important to doctors as their medical book, and we hope local practitioners will be contacting us for a copy."

Copies of *Enhancing Care Provision for Blind and Partially Sighted People in GP Surgeries: Guidelines for Best Practice* are available by phoning **0118 983 8304** or e-mailing [rebecca.atherton@guidedogs.org.uk](mailto:rebecca.atherton@guidedogs.org.uk)

## **NOTE TO EDITOR**

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**For further media information please phone Chris Dyson or Vicky Bell  
at Guide Dogs on 0118 983 8281 or 8379 (mobile: 07768 523996)**

See attached for a summary of Guide Dogs' research:

*The Experiences of Visually Impaired Users of the NHS  
A Report by The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association*

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### **The Experiences of Visually Impaired Users of the NHS A Report by The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association**

There are over a million blind or partially sighted people in the UK, of whom around 90% are over 60 years old. Furthermore, demographic trends in the UK indicate that the number of people over the age of 80 is set to increase by almost half in the next twenty years, while those over the age of 90 will double in the same period. Therefore the need for appropriate, responsive and effective provision of health care for blind and partially sighted people is crucial.

The degree to which the NHS is currently able to respond to the needs of visually impaired patients has been explored in research conducted by The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association. The charity carried out a survey of 832 blind and partially sighted patients in order to assess their experiences of accessing health care. Some of the key findings of the survey can be found below.

#### **The GP Setting**

- Up to 57% of those surveyed felt that certain aspects of the GP service were in need of improvement. Key areas cited were staff awareness and the need for prescriptions in Braille and large print.
- Over two-thirds felt their GP was unable to give them meaningful information on support services for visually impaired people
- 96% never received letters from GPs in preferred format and 97% never received prescriptions in preferred format

#### **The Hospital Setting: The Outpatient Experience**

- Only one tenth received an appointment letter in preferred format
- 45% found signage in hospital unhelpful
- Nurses were the most highly rated provider – 79% felt very satisfied with treatment received at the hands of nursing staff.

## **The Hospital Setting: The Inpatient Experience**

- 96% did not receive letters of admission or any other documentation relating to their stay in hospital in a preferred format
- Of the 35% who had to fill in forms as part of the admission process, 76% could not read the forms.

As a result of these findings, Guide Dogs has launched a campaign – Access for All: NHS Services – to raise awareness of the access issues faced by visually impaired patients and to seek positive change. As part of the campaign, we are offering, for a fee, pan-disability access audits to GP surgeries. The visual impairment-specific results of these will feed into best practice guidelines to be published next year. For more information about this campaign, our access audits, or to order a copy of the full survey report (£5) please contact Rebecca Atherton at Guide Dogs on 0118 983 8304.