COMMENT

“We must tackle the stigma of age-related hearing loss”

Hearing loss is a condition that’s easy to ignore. Affected older people are unlikely to admit they are struggling to hear because they don’t want to bother anyone or be treated differently. It’s low down on the priority list of long-term conditions for research and has a high level of under-diagnosis, so treatment of age-related hearing loss is shockingly low.

Our report Hearing Loss and Older People identifies how many older people are suffering in silence and the impact it has on their lives. Older people with hearing loss are more likely to experience higher levels of mental and physical ill health. They are at greater risk of cardiovascular disease and they are less likely to socialise, putting them at increased risk of depression and loneliness. One study showed that people with hearing loss are 2.45 times more likely to develop depression. And those with severe hearing problems are at five times the risk of developing dementia.

The main reason a large number of people don’t admit they’re struggling to hear is because they worry about being treated differently. Also, many older people tried hearing aids previously, found them difficult to get along with and gave up as a result. This group need to be informed about the easier-to-use and more discreet hearing aids available today.

As an older people’s charity, we know all too well the impact hearing loss can have. We have joined forces with Specsavers hearing centres to launch our Listen Out campaign, which aims to raise awareness of age-related hearing loss and of the treatments available.

To tackle the stigma of hearing loss, we want everyone – friends, family, neighbours and health professionals – to listen out for the signs. Nurses who frequently come into contact with older people can play a key role in identifying those who are having difficulty hearing.

Guiding older people to the help they need can make all the difference. Age-related hearing loss is something that can be addressed. The cost to the NHS of its negative impact on health and wellbeing, as well as the suffering of older people, is too high for it not to be tackled.

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SPOTLIGHT

Helping patients access mental health services

It is difficult to imagine the distress and confusion experienced by people detained under the Mental Health Act.

The authors of our article on page 24 highlight that anyone detained under the act has the legal right to an independent mental health advocate to help them understand what is happening and support them in decision making. However, fewer than half of those eligible for these services do so.

Certain groups, including people from some minority ethnic communities, are less likely to get help even though they have a higher prevalence of mental illness and experience higher rates of detention in hospital. Staff working with detained patients have a legal duty to provide access to an independent mental health advocate.

Our article explains how nurses can help patients access these vital services.