

Guide Dogs launches NHS Services Report

More than a third of visually impaired people feel that their GP is not fully aware of their needs, a new report issued by The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association has shown. The NHS Services Report has highlighted that although many blind and partially sighted people are happy with the services of their GP, there are also significant problems and areas in need of improvement. The major problems faced by people with sight loss are: limited physical assistance, limited staff awareness and a lack of information in a preferred format, such as Braille or large print.

In response to the findings, Guide Dogs has launched its Access for All: NHS Services Campaign at a reception at the House of Commons on Tuesday June 8. This involves the charity working with the health care sector to improve facilities and provision of NHS services for visually impaired people.

Access for All will initially focus on GPs' surgeries. Every surgery in the UK has been sent information about the campaign and Guide Dogs aims to compile a national set of standards of service provision, which will act as a model of good practice for GPs.

Tom Pey, Guide Dogs' Director of Policy explained: "There are around 1.7 million blind and partially sighted people in the UK; 90% of these are over 60. As demographic trends indicate that the elderly population is set to rise in the next couple of decades, the ability of the NHS to respond to the needs of visually impaired people is of paramount importance.

"Guide Dogs' report has highlighted specific areas in need of improvement. Many of these, such as assisting someone to a seat and into the surgery and improving signage around the building could easily be resolved at no great expense. Well trained staff, accessible information and a safe building will be of clear benefit to both patients and staff."

The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) has welcomed Guide Dogs' report. Dr Maureen Baker, Honorary Secretary of the RCGP, said: "There are very real problems in gaining access to care for this group of patients. The Royal College of General Practitioners' (RCGP) Disability Task Group is exploring ways of developing training and support for GPs in their work with blind or partially sighted patients."

Key findings of the NHS Services Report: 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.

- Of one-third (32%) of respondents who needed help in completing registration forms, assistance was provided by surgery staff in a third (10%) of these cases
- Over half of respondents (55%) required help in finding a seat in the waiting area, yet only about half (26%) received it
 - - 65% needed help getting from the waiting area to consulting room, yet just under one-third received no help
- Over two-thirds felt their GP was unable to give them meaningful information on support services for visually impaired people
- 95% never received health advice leaflets in preferred format such as Braille or large print
- 96% never received letters from GPs in preferred format and 97% never received prescriptions in preferred format
- About 40% of the population felt that their GP was not fully aware of their needs
 - More than 60% felt other staff in the surgery were not fully aware of their needs
 - Over two thirds of those surveyed were aware of the signage within the surgery, of these the majority felt this to be fairly unhelpful or not at all helpful.

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.

The report highlights the need to include questions addressing issues of visual impairment in future patient satisfaction surveys. Guide Dogs is recommending that improved and increased training for all NHS frontline staff is essential to help meet the needs of visually impaired people. The charity also wants to improve access to and around the surgery and improve announcement systems as well as see greater provision of information in preferred formats.

Tom Pey explained: "The message which comes loud and clear from visually impaired people is that education, awareness and training are key. Guide Dogs will initially be carrying out access audits in a small number of GP surgeries throughout the UK, and our findings will form national agreed standards of practice. We hope to offer audits and

training courses to all GP surgeries throughout the UK as part of the campaign - and in turn ensure that blind and partially sighted people can look forward to receiving first-rate health care in the future."

The executive summary of the report can be downloaded from the research and grants section at <http://www.guidedogs.org.uk/aboutus>