

Supporting People with Learning Disabilities

General Tips for NHS Staff

People with learning disabilities have health needs like anyone else. In the past it has been difficult for them to access general health services. The term learning disability is a label. Labels help us describe one aspect of a person, but do not capture the whole individual. Every person described as someone with a learning disability is a person first.

Learning disability is taken as meaning:

- Being less able to understand new or complicated information, or being less able to learn new skills.
- Being less able to cope without support.
- Which started before the person became an adult and which has a long term effect on his/her development.
- This means that the person may have difficulties understanding, learning and remembering new things, and in generalising any learning to new situations. Because of these difficulties with learning, the person may have difficulties with a number of social tasks, for example communication, self care, awareness of health and safety.
- Adapted from the definition in the Government white paper 'Valuing People'. A New Strategy for Learning Disabilities for the 21st Century (2001).

If a person presents at your department who you think might have a learning disability – the following questions should be considered:

- Are you using the appropriate communication for this person? or refer to communication book for tips.
- Does the person have a Traffic Light Hospital Assessment? (A patient held information form).
- Has the information been given in a format that the person can understand?
- Has the person been given time to consider the information and make decisions?
- Do you need the person's consent? Have you explored issues? (No one can give consent on behalf of another adult.)
- Does the person need a quiet area to wait in?
- The carer may be distressed – what kind of support do they need?
- Do you need to contact the learning disability team for support?

The following is a suggested procedure to gain advice and support for staff and for the person with a learning disability.

- Gain individual's name (if possible).
- Teams can identify if they know the individual and if yes, advice and support can be arranged.
- If not known, general advice may be given or information on other services e.g. mental health.
- Out-of-hours Social Services support is available for emergencies only.

It is important to address the person as an adult, even if using a simplified form of communication.

Look for the 'Hospital Communication book' in the the translation folder on EVERY WARD for more tips.

There's also one colour patient information flipbook on every ward to help explain clinical procedures to patients.

Communication

- Ensure that your communication is clear, break information down in to smaller "chunks", so the person is not overloaded.
- Do not use jargon, explain any longer or unfamiliar words e.g. "an X ray, where we can take a picture of your arm."
- Give the person time to respond – getting your message across takes time when you have communication problems.
- Use gesture to emphasize your communication e.g. point to the part of your body you are talking about, ask the person to show you where they have pain.
- Use pictures/demonstrate what you are going to do before you do it.
- To determine if the person has understood what they have been told, ask them to repeat back to you what is going to happen.
- Check back that an individual has understood, people do not always say if they haven't or if they need clarification. People can be over eager to please, particularly to comply with those who appear to be in authority.
- Be aware of any other disabilities e.g. hearing loss, epilepsy present.

Explanation

- Explain procedures before you carry them out – a syringe for your ears can look like an injection!
- Giving your name and explaining your job can help to re-assure the person.

Reducing anxiety

- Being more informal can help e.g. not wearing white coats.
- Removing the person from a busy environment can decrease anxiety and confusion levels.
- Hospital routines may cause further undue stress, so don't force the person to wear gowns, undergo procedures e.g. taking blood pressure, unless absolutely necessary.
- It is possible that the person may present with challenging behaviours. It is important to consider the communicative function of behaviour. Be aware of the person's environment and what could be contributing to the behaviour.

Consent

- No one can consent to medical intervention except for the person. Support surrounding this issue can be sought from the community learning disability services. Gloucestershire Royal has a consent policy to refer to as well.

Don't SHOUT!
It's rude and it doesn't help!

Community Learning Disability Teams (CLDT):

East County CLDT	01452 321059
Gloucester CLDT	08454 226011
Stroud CLDT	01453 827161
Forest CLDT	01594 827771

Health Facilitation Team:

simon.shorrick@glos.nhs.uk

Freephone: 0800 019 3346

denise.mellon@glos.nhs.uk