Effectiveness of Vision Awareness Training for Learning Disabilities Health and Social Care staff

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Introduction
In the United Kingdom (UK) around 1.2 million people have learning disabilities (LD). People with LD have high levels of physical and mental health conditions, compared to the wider population, and they can experience health inequities if their health needs are not recognised, thus met.¹ People with LD also often experience barriers to accessing and receiving appropriate health care. A recognised barrier is lack of awareness or knowledge of their particular health needs amongst health and social care professionals.² People with LD are ten times more likely to have a visual impairment, compared to the wider population.³ In addition, it can be difficult to recognise sight loss in some people with LD due to their cognitive limitations and/or communication difficulties.⁴

Aim
The aim of this research study was to evaluate the vision awareness training over a 12-month assessment period, to determine whether it increased the knowledge, awareness and confidence of health and social care professionals about the vision needs of the people with LD they care for or support.

Method
Vision awareness training participants were recruited via work emails and information sessions at their place of work, provided by the RNIB, within the Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS region LD services, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is the largest region in Scotland. All health and social care professionals who undertook the vision awareness training over a 12-month period (2014) were invited to voluntarily take part in the study pre-training. They were sent a project information sheet and a questionnaire by post 2 – 3 weeks before they undertook the training. A post-training questionnaire was then given to each participant at the end of their training session. Each questionnaire was anonymised – using a unique corresponding research number for each participant – and returned to a researcher who was not involved in any aspect of the training design and delivery.

The one-day vision awareness training was delivered by one RNIB staff member to class sizes between 5 and 14 trainees. The training content was designed to increase knowledge/awareness of issues, including causes of sight loss, recognition of signs of hidden sight loss, barriers to eye health care, and an introduction to the visual environment. Training included a practical demonstration of visual impairment/s, using simulation spectacles, to increase sensitivity/awareness of vision needs.

Sample of Results
Ninety (67%) of the health and social care professionals who undertook the training completed pre- and post-training questionnaires. Pre-training, the majority were more likely to underestimate the higher prevalence of visual impairments in this population (53% pre-training compared with 10% post-training).

Vision awareness training significantly increased health and social care professionals’ knowledge/awareness of a wider range of vision problems which are experienced more commonly by people with LD. Knowledge/awareness of 9 out of 10 common vision problems (e.g. refractive error and strabismus) was significantly increased post-training (p ≤ 0.01), while the majority of participants were already aware of cataracts occurring more commonly in this population (leading to a non-significant post-training result, p = 0.007).

Findings also demonstrated that vision awareness training significantly increased health and social care professionals’ confidence in recognising the signs of sight loss (p ≤ 0.01).

Conclusion
Health and social care professionals who work within specialist learning disabilities significantly benefit from additional awareness training on the vision health needs of people with learning disabilities. Vision awareness training addresses a recognised barrier (lack of awareness/knowledge) to effective vision health care delivery, to ensure the vision health needs of their clients with learning disabilities are being met.

This research study forms part of a programme of training evaluation, to promote the vision health needs of people with LD. Other work to follow includes evaluation of direct client benefit of Vision Champion training for health and social care professionals who work with people with LD, and evaluation of an e-learning module for care and support workers of people with LD.

We have now published the findings from this research project evaluation in the British Journal of Visual Impairment. If you would like more information about our research findings then please contact Janet Finlayson at Janet.Finlayson@gcu.ac.uk. You can also access a copy of the research article by clicking on this link directly to the journal at jvi.sagepub.com/content/33/3/227.abstract.

The article reference is:

References