

29th January 2008

P R E S S R E L E A S E

Accessibility of Health Information for People with a Learning Disability

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland today (29 January), launched a report entitled "Accessibility of Health Information in Northern Ireland for People with a Learning Disability" following a Formal Investigation under the Disability Discrimination legislation.

The report identified that some healthcare professionals do not adjust their communication style for people with a learning disability. Other barriers to effective communication included attitude and levels of awareness as well as a lack of familiarity of the needs of people with a learning disability by health professionals. Time issues, both in terms of waiting for a consultation (which, in turn, increased anxiety levels) and the actual amount of time available for consultation itself were also highlighted. In addition, it was identified that written information is generally not produced in an accessible format suitable for people with a learning disability.

The report outlines a series of low-cost and practical recommendations. These include: the production of appropriate written information - addressing style, size, use of pictures and language issues; communication training for health service practitioners; the maintenance of comprehensive health records; liaison with a Community Learning Disability Team; use of Patient Liaison Nurses and the option of a Passport System to assist individuals with their communications needs.

Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland said:

"Using our investigative powers is an important contribution to promoting equality of opportunity. The initiation of this Formal Investigation recognised the evidence that people with a learning disability are more likely than the general population to experience poorer physical and mental health. Its starting point was that the extent and quality of information available to people with learning disability would influence their capacity to have access to the full range and standard of health provision. It examined thoroughly the methods of communication currently used within the health service and has provided a number of straightforward and inexpensive recommendations which could make a real difference to people with a learning disability.

"The Investigation found a great deal of good practice but much remains to be done. The Investigation highlighted the fact that only a small proportion of those with a learning disability who participated in the study, just 3% of the panellists, understood the written information used during the Investigation without assistance. This is significant as it was

estimated in 2003 that there were over 16,000 people with a learning disability living in Northern Ireland.”

“Verbal communication also came under scrutiny and it has been highlighted that many health care professionals speak directly to carers rather than to the patient.”

“The Commission will work with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to see the implementation of the recommendations of this report. People with a learning disability should be encouraged and assisted to improve their health and we hope this Formal Investigation results in real change across the health service.” concluded Mr. Collins.

ENDS