



Practical advice when working with patients with a visual impairment.

There are about 11,500 people with a visual impairment in Bristol. Of these around 1,500 are blind and around 10,000 are partially-sighted. The vast majority of people with a visual impairment are over 65. Many people with a visual impairment face challenges in accessing primary care services due to their visual impairment. These can include accessible communication and information, navigating around premises and a lack of awareness and understanding of their needs arising from their impairment.

To help improve services to people with a visual impairment, the Bristol Sight Loss Council (BSLC) have prepared a number of pages which provide useful guidance. Further information, including useful short videos can be found in this section is included in this section.

1 Best practice guidance when supporting someone with a visual impairment

This section contains a checklist of ten challenges experienced by patients with a visual impairment and the practical actions you can take to mitigate them.

2 Guidance for remote consultations with patients with a visual impairment.

This section discusses the challenges faced by patients with a visual impairment and their clinicians when carrying out remote consultations combined with video examinations. It offers practical advice on how to mitigate these challenges.

3 Guidance for communicating with patients with a visual impairment.

This section gives guidance on the preferred methods of communicating with patients with a visual impairment.

1 Best practice guidance for supporting someone with a visual impairment

Lack of understanding

A visual impairment can sometimes be hidden – Not all blind or partially sighted people use a cane or have a Guide Dog. Some may have useful vision which allows them to navigate independently but may require assistance in signing in, completing forms, reading standard print, or finding rooms if it is a large facility.

Access requirements

Access requirements should be kept on the patients record so that the patient does not have to continually repeat themselves, especially when privacy is an issue. An EMIS alert should be added to ensure that someone answering the phone is considering access requirements for a patient calling in.

How accessible is your website and app?

Just making the text larger is not enough. People with a visual impairment can use websites or mobile apps, it is important that you consider accessibility features with your website. They may use a screen reader, magnification software or change the colour of the screen. The website should also be simple, clear, and easy to navigate. Ensure that contact details are easy to find.

Ensure your doctors' and nurses' rooms are accessible to people with a visual impairment.

Ensure signage to your facility is clear with good colour contrast and at eye level, this should be followed throughout including doctors' and nurses' rooms, reception, and toilets. It is important that there is appropriate lighting in all areas. In the waiting rooms ensure that there is both audio and visual options for when announcing appointments.

Contacting a patient

It is important that you are following the NHS Accessible Information Standard. You need to know what format the person needs to access their information. They may prefer to be contacted either in large print, braille, audio or electronically. It may be beneficial to remind patients of appointments via phone or text message. The least accessible formats are standard font posted letters, prescriptions instructions and leaflets. Many patients will now use digital formats, however some may still ask for large print (Which you should be able to achieve by changing the font size in Word to 20). If you need braille or audio, please refer to the Language Support Unit. Please update your records to record the preferred method of communication.

Helping your patient

At reception it is important to introduce yourself to the person with a visual impairment. You should ask if they need assistance in finding a seat and also if they will need to be shown where their appointment will take place (you may need to guide them to this). When they need to see the doctor, you may need to assist them to the room, or the doctor could collect them. It is always important to ask what assistance the person needs. It is good practice to ask how they would like to be guided i.e., preferred side, hand on shoulder, hand on elbow or follow.

Additional information, posters/leaflets in the surgery

It is important that you inform patients with a visual impairment about the posters. This includes any additional information the GP or nurse wants to give to the patient, especially regarding instructions for prescribed medication.

Ask for feedback

It is important that patients with a visual impairment get the opportunity to provide feedback on the services they receive from you. Make sure that you have an accessible way for them to do this e.g. online or over the phone.

Onward referral

In your referral letter please include details of the patients access requirements.

Touch screen signing in systems

Please either make them accessible (e.g. font sizes and colour contrasts or audio addition) or assist with the signing in.

2 Guidance for remote consultations with patients with a visual impairment

The majority of people with a visual impairment in Bristol are over 70 and have accessibility issues with websites and have limited technological skills. i.e., Their smartphone and computer skills are limited.

Following the outbreak of Covid 19, remote consultations with patients are now the default forms of initial consultation. They take the form of telephone consultations, or a telephone consultation with video using patients' smartphones, or other e-communications via emails, texts, or web-based platforms.

Telephone

Telephone consultations are welcomed by patients with a visual impairment as it removes the challenges of travelling to surgeries with or without a personal assistant or friend.

Video

Consultations using video are extremely difficult for patients with a visual impairment to manage as they cannot see what is on the screen. They can become very distressed and agitated leading to unsuccessful outcomes. The default method of consultation with patients with a visual impairment should preferably therefore be face to face, unless the patient confirms that they are able and comfortable with video.

E-communications

The ability to use these forms of communication vary enormously between patients. Web-based platforms, emails and texts can be very difficult for patients with a visual impairment, particularly older people, and can result in distress. Practices are therefore advised to avoid using e-communication consulting methods with patients with a visual impairment unless they have already ascertained that the patient is comfortable and competent in using these methods.

Letters

Patients with a visual impairment that are competent with technology often prefer to receive e-communications than to receive letters. Letters usually require a carer, friend, or family member to read them to the patient, thus diminishing their independence.

Recommendations

Choosing the appropriate method of consultation and communication relies upon GP judgement which in turn depends upon having good records of the degree of visual impairment of the patient. You are advised to do the following:

- Always ask the patient about their preferred method of communication and examination
- Ensure that the patient record contains details of the degree of visual impairment and states the preferred method of communication with the practice.
- Remember that patients with a visual impairment prefer an initial telephone consultation in preference to having to travel to the surgery.

A face-to-face consultation should always be offered in preference to a video consultation for patients that are blind or severely unsighted.

3 Guidance for communications with patients with a visual impairment

The majority of patients with a visual impairment are over 70 and often have limited technological skills, i.e. smartphone and computers are difficult to manage. Communications are through one of the following:

- Telephone calls.
- Texts using smartphones.
- Letters.

The most important thing is to ask the individual how they would like to receive communications that are usually in the written form.

The preferences for most people with a visual impairment are discussed below:

Telephone

Telephone communications are welcomed by patients with a visual impairment as there are no sight issues involved.

E-communications

The abilities to use texts, emails and web-based platforms vary enormously between patients with a visual impairment, particularly the elderly. Practices are therefore advised to avoid using

e-communication methods with patients with a visual impairment unless they have already ascertained that the patient is comfortable and competent in using these methods.

Letters

Patients with a visual impairment that are competent with technology often prefer to receive e-communications than to receive letters. Letters usually require a sighted personal assistant, friend, or family member to read them to the patient, thus diminishing their independence.

Recommendations

- It is important to ask the individual how they would like to receive communications that are usually in the written form, and to record this in the patient notes.
- Choosing the appropriate method of communication relies upon good judgement, which in turn depends upon having good records of the degree of visual impairment of the patient. Ensure that the patient record contains details of the degree of visual impairment and states the preferred method of communication.
- The patient's record should be referred, and the correct communication method selected.

4 Further information

The BSLC is a group of blind and partially-sighted volunteers, who represent and reflect the experiences and views of people with a visual impairment in the city to policy-makers and service providers. The aim is to bring about positive changes to policies and services through collaboration, dialogue and partnership working. If you should like to know more, please visit our website using the link below.

<https://www.sightlosscouncils.org.uk/meet-the-councils/bristol/>

Further Information

The following organisations all work with people with a visual impairment providing a range of different services including counselling, information and advice, mobility, and rehabilitation:

Blind Veterans: <https://www.blindveterans.org.uk/>

Deaf Blind UK: <https://deafblind.org.uk/>

Guide Dogs: <https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/>

Macular Society: <https://www.macularsociety.org/>

Royal National Institute Of Blind People:
<https://www.rnib.org.uk/>

SENSE: <https://www.sense.org.uk/>

Sight Support West:
<https://www.sightsupportwest.org.uk/>

Useful short videos to help improve your understanding of how people with a visual impairment see the world and the best ways to interact with them.

Video 1 describes five common sight loss conditions, and with the aid of realistic computer simulation enables you to see how the VI patient sees the world. It runs for 17 minutes. Here is the link to the video:

Video 3 takes a light-hearted look at some common mistakes that are made when interacting with patients with a visual impairment. It runs for 5 minutes. Here is the link to it.

Video 2 demonstrates how to guide a visually impaired patient around the practice premises. It runs for 6 minutes. Here is the link to the video.