

Face Blindness & the Health Service



FACE BLIND UK
Living with Prosopagnosia

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Prosopagnosia, commonly known as face blindness, is a neurological disorder that affects an individual's ability to recognise familiar faces – well known people, friends, and even close family. Research shows that face blindness affects around 1 in 50 in the population, a total of 1.2 million people in the UK.

Face blindness can be acquired through brain injury or illness, but is more usually developmental (i.e. present from birth). People are affected to different degrees, and most people with developmental prosopagnosia are only diagnosed in later life, having developed coping strategies which mask their difficulties.

Navigating Health Services

Someone with face blindness may not recognise the health professional who's already spoken to them if they come across them again (even 5 minutes later). The patient may therefore repeat themselves or fail to pass on vital information if they mistakenly think that they have already met.



The face blind patient can feel very lost on a ward, may not recognise their visitors, and they won't know who's been helpful or who to ask if they have a query.

Strategies that individuals use to recognise people may include hairstyle, clothes, body shape, mannerisms, gait or the context. However, this may involve conscious mental effort and a good memory, and are quite unlike the automatic response to a known face which people with normal face recognition do without any awareness of the process.

A patient's ability to make use of these strategies can be undermined by illness, and for a patient in hospital this may be compounded by anxiety and stress.

The fast-moving environment of a ward, with constant changes of staff, is also likely to be difficult to manage. Uniforms can compound an individual's difficulty, and when combined with hair that is neatly tied back, staff can appear identical to someone who has face blindness.

What can help?

Staff who notice this confusion in a patient could easily attribute it to their illness, a side effect of prescribed drugs, or an early symptom of dementia. So, it is vital that health service workers are aware of face blindness, and perhaps discuss with a patient even if they are not aware that their difficulty recognising faces could be caused by a recognised neurological condition.

Name badges need to be very clear, bearing in mind if you say to someone “Come back to me after you’ve seen the doctor”, that badge may be the patient’s only way of identifying you again. Patients in bed may not be wearing their glasses, so using large print on labels is important.

Photo boards of staff with their roles and names may help some people with face blindness. Different colours of uniform may be meaningless to patients, but an explanatory leaflet can help distinguish a physiotherapist from a nurse.



All key personnel involved with patient care can help by identifying themselves and introducing others at each meeting, and in this way acting as a ‘recogniser’. Introductions are vital, especially if visiting someone at home. Here a uniform gives the person a big clue, but you also need to identify yourself each time you visit. Don’t assume the person knows which district nurse you are, even if you have visited many times before.

Hospital visitors who are face blind may be embarrassed to ask, but may need precise directions, not just to the ward, but to the patient and their bed. Face blindness can run in families.

Developing Awareness

Face blindness has been a subject of increasing research in the last three decades. ‘Prosopagnosia’ (but not the term face blindness) is now on the list of long-term conditions which can be included on a patient’s medical record.

As face blindness affects around 2% of the population, there will be health care staff who are face blind, though they may be unaware of the condition. Employers need to work with these members of staff, to find positive solutions to the challenges that face blindness may present for a particular job or role, as part of their duty of care and their equal opportunities commitment.

For more information on prosopagnosia please email info@faceblind.org.uk

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