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book reviews

Working with deaf people: a handbook for healthcare professionals

By Anna Middleton. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009. 230 pp. £24.99

This little book is packed with useful information for healthcare professionals, guiding them through the many pitfalls deaf people can encounter when seeking medical advice and help. Illustrative case histories are given and the introductory chapter merits revisiting after these stories have been read.

Disability legislation and equality awareness mean that deaf people, whether they use speech/lip reading or sign language, have a right to a level of service with full and appropriate communication between themselves and healthcare professionals. Everyone working in the field of deafness knows that there is a history of painful, dangerous and avoidable mistakes in this area. Many deaf people either avoid going for consultations or come away none the wiser or actually misled.

This book will go a long way to rectifying this situation. It gives a glossary of acceptable and accurate terms. For example, people who have been deaf from early life and are sign language users do not view deafness as a medical condition or as a disability. They are a cultural and linguistic group. Sign language is

not based on English and deaf signers may not have sophisticated literacy skills, so professionals who think they can just use a pen and paper are sadly mistaken. A qualified sign language interpreter must be used. Similarly, the assumption that a deafened person who uses speech can lip read is inaccurate. Many words look the same on the lips and constant checking and feedback is required.

Deaf people, whether they speak or sign, hear with their eyes. Therefore if the clinician is behind a computer screen, wearing a surgical mask, turned away, in dim light for an eye examination or behind the patient listening to the chest, the deaf person does not know what has been said and may not even be aware that the clinician has spoken. The scope for mistakes and misunderstandings is obvious.

This book explains how to understand deaf people's psychological and communication needs and how to meet them. It explains how to provide a deaf and deaf blind friendly service from the outset. Above all, it explains how to create a positive attitude towards deaf and deaf blind people in place of old fashioned, patronising views. It is the clinician's responsibility to ensure that effective communication takes place and this book explains how to do it. It is highly recommended for students, clinicians and everyone who comes into contact with deaf or deafened people in a professional capacity.

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