



Hearing and sight loss: a review of the issues affecting older people

This publication summarises findings from a review conducted by Dr Liz Hodges and Dr Graeme Douglas, University of Birmingham.

Older people who acquire both sight and hearing loss in later life have distinct needs from those whose visual and hearing impairments began earlier in life. This is because of the different life experiences they have, and also because they may think that the deterioration in sight and hearing is simply part of ageing. Perhaps partly for this reason, the experiences and needs of this group have not been widely investigated.

Thomas Pocklington Trust commissioned the University of Birmingham to carry out a review of recent literature and organise a workshop with the aim of making recommendations for future work. The study presented findings and recommendations for potential future work in four areas:

- Definition and population – who are older people with combined sight and hearing loss?
- What are their needs and circumstances?
- What services are required and how should they be evaluated?
- What training is required by staff who work with this group of people?

Project methods

The project team used two methods to investigate the issues. Initially they reviewed relevant literature in the fields of sight and hearing loss in older people. Then they arranged a workshop with a group of professionals who had experience and knowledge of working with older people with hearing and sight loss. The workshop was useful in drawing out the key issues from the literature and identifying the implications for potential future work.

Who are older people with combined sight and hearing loss?

The commonly used definition of deafblindness focuses upon the functional implications of combined sight and hearing loss, which include problems with access to information, communication and mobility. However, the literature and workshop showed that there is not a common agreed understanding of how this definition should be used. This makes it difficult to identify older people who have combined sight and hearing loss. In particular, older people may not recognise themselves as having a combined sensory loss, or as being 'deafblind', even if they are having difficulty with access to information, communication and mobility. There are no recognised or widely accepted tools for assessment or screening of older people to identify them as having combined sensory loss. As a result there are no accepted estimates of the numbers of older people with hearing and sight loss.

What are their needs and circumstances?

The review of the literature showed that the following overlapping areas of need and barriers have been identified:

- Difficulty in accessing information, including public information;
- Difficulty with communication between individuals and in the community;
- Difficulty with mobility and transport;
- Need for stimulation and relief from social isolation;
- Need for social work and/or counselling in response to depression;

- Specialist requirements in terms of housing and equipment for daily living;
- Particular needs of those from ethnic minority communities.

The literature reviewed was mostly in the form of case studies, biographies and expert views. There is no substantial research which quantifies the impact of sight and hearing loss on the quality of people's lives. What this means is that we do not have a clear understanding of the precise impact for an individual person with hearing and sight loss, or the numbers of people this might affect. Therefore, there is a need for more detailed research evidence.

What services are required and how should they be evaluated?

Analysis of UK government initiatives and publications reveals that there is greater acknowledgement than in the past of the distinct needs of people with combined sensory loss, including older people. However, there is no published research evidence evaluating the services received by older people with vision and hearing loss. Services can be usefully thought of as being of two kinds: those services for deafblind people (such as communicator-guides), and access to mainstream services by deafblind people (such as access to generic housing, support or day care services). There is no information about how successful these services are and the impact they have on the lives of older people with combined sensory loss.

What training is required by staff who work with this group of people?

The study identified three groups of professionals who work with people with hearing and sight loss: those with specialist roles in sensory impairment, those who work in direct care and those who have more general roles. There is little training available which is specific to the needs of people with acquired hearing and sight loss and those in specialist roles have usually learnt through experience and building upon training specific to deafness or visual impairment. For more general and direct care staff (for example, staff working with older people) an increased awareness of the issues of combined hearing and sight loss is probably the first step. Whilst relevant training is available, it is not always accessible to staff whose status and pay may be low (for example those working in care homes).

Recommendations for potential future work

Based on the work carried out, the following issues were identified as needing further research and development.

In relation to population and identification:

- Explore ways of using already existing definitions of hearing and sight loss to help identify older people with disabling sight and hearing loss;
- Communicate the particular needs of this group to relevant professionals, including policy makers, social care professionals, and researchers;
- Communicate with older people with hearing and sight loss who may not recognise themselves as being 'deafblind' or having 'multi sensory impairment';
- Trial screening tools for professionals to help identify people who have hearing and sight loss and to identify their particular needs.

In relation to the needs of older people with combined sensory loss:

- Examine the impact of sight and hearing loss on the lives of older people and the social barriers they face. Methods for such research would need careful design to overcome any barriers to communication, but should include interviews with older people with hearing and sight loss as well as those who work and live with them.

In relation to service development and evaluation:

- Audit current specialist services, such as communicator-guide services, and develop means of assessing their value, effectiveness and impact for this group;
- Evaluate the accessibility of mainstream services for older people by those with combined sight and hearing loss.

In relation to staff and training:

- Investigate qualifications held by specialist workers to see what training has been most effective in the development of services. This could then be extended to more general workers, leading to the development of additional training.

Conclusions

The area of combined hearing and sight loss in older people has been inadequately researched and the literature and knowledge that exists is often anecdotal and based on opinion and experience.

There is a need for further research and understanding of the population of older people with combined sight and hearing loss, in particular helping people to recognise their own needs and the fact that help is available, rather than simply accepting it as part of the process of ageing. Although services are available, there is no evidence about how effective they are in meeting the needs of these people, or indeed whether the needs have been appropriately identified. Those staff providing services may not have had training in this field, and such training also has not been evaluated, so it is not clear whether it is appropriate or meeting the needs of either the staff or the people with combined sensory loss.

The study highlights the need for continued development of services for this group of people and the evaluation of those services. Nevertheless, such services must be underpinned by a greater understanding of the needs of older people with hearing and sight loss and the barriers and challenges they face.

Authors

Dr Liz Hodges
School of Education
University of Birmingham

Dr Graeme Douglas
VICTAR
School of Education
University of Birmingham

How to obtain further information

A short report, in the form of an 'Occasional Paper', entitled *Hearing and sight loss: a review of the issues affecting older people*, and the full report, entitled *Short study on hearing and sight loss* by Dr Liz Hodges and Dr Graeme Douglas are available from:

Thomas Pocklington Trust
5 Castle Row
Horticultural Place
London W4 4JQ

Telephone: 020 8995 0880

Email: info@pocklington-trust.org.uk

Web: www.pocklington-trust.org.uk

Copies of this report in large print, audio tape or CD, Braille and electronic format are available from Thomas Pocklington Trust.

Background on Pocklington

Thomas Pocklington Trust is the leading provider of housing, care and support services for people with sight loss in the UK. Each year we also commit around £600,000 to fund social and public health research and development projects.

Pocklington's operations offer a range of sheltered and supported housing, residential care, respite care, day services, home care services, resource centres and community based support services.

A Positive about Disability and an Investor in People organisation, we are adopting quality assurance systems for all our services to ensure we not only maintain our quality standards, but also seek continuous improvement in line with the changing needs and expectations of our current and future service users.

We are working in partnership with local authorities, registered social landlords and other voluntary organisations to expand our range of services.

Our research and development programme aims to identify practical ways to improve the lives of people with sight loss, by improving social inclusion, independence and quality of life, improving and developing service outcomes as well as focusing on public health issues.

We are also applying our research findings by way of pilot service developments to test new service models and develop best practice.



5 Castle Row
Horticultural Place
Chiswick
London W4 4JQ

Tel: 020 8995 0880
Email: info@pocklington-trust.org.uk
Web: www.pocklington-trust.org.uk

Published by Thomas Pocklington Trust
Registered Charity No. 1113729
Company Registered No. 5359336

ISBN 978-0-9554465-2-8

