



## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Seeing Better Together: Optometrists Learning More About People With Learning Disabilities**

There are well over a million people with some level of learning disability in the UK <sup>i,ii</sup>. People with learning disabilities are more likely to have eye problems, yet traditionally have problems accessing eye care. A new Continuing Education pack produced by Healthcall Optical Services in collaboration with SeeAbility and Replay Learning is aiming to make it easier for optometrists to offer the eye care that this group needs.

People have learning disabilities due to damage to the brain before, during, or after birth, or from genetic or chromosome factors<sup>iii</sup>. This damage can also cause eyesight problems. SeeAbility estimates that in the UK today 1 in 3 people with a learning disability have a sight problem.

People with learning disabilities tend to have a higher incidence of eye problems of all sorts. For example, people with Cerebral Palsy have an incidence of Strabismus somewhere between 50 and 69% compared to 4% in the general population: the incidence is between 27 and 36% in people with Down 's syndrome. And, due to the very nature of their disabilities, this group has problems in getting access to eye care. Co-author Maggie Woodhouse says, "The pack highlights the importance of eye examinations for people with learning disabilities, because they are at much higher risk of eye disorders. It also demonstrates how poor the access to eye examinations is at the moment for this vulnerable population." As highlighted in the CET pack, it may make little sense to a person if they are, "going to a shop between the bank and butchers, being taken into a dark room with a stranger, being asked lots of funny questions and having lights shone into their eyes"

Charity SeeAbility is working to transform eye care and vision for people with learning disabilities through its eye 2 eye Campaign. eye 2 eye provides information, advice and support for people with learning disabilities, their families and carers, eye care professionals and health and social services staff. Paula Spinks-Chamberlain, SeeAbility's Director of Information and Advisory Services says, "We have been working in co-operation with Healthcall across the UK for a number of years. We recently partnered with them on a screening project in a secondary school for children with profound learning disabilities in Sheffield. Healthcall originally produced this CET pack for their own optometrists and approached us about sharing the resource with other optometrists across the UK."

Dawn Roberts, Clinical Director at Healthcall Optical Services has been a driving force behind the new CET pack. She says, "Working with SeeAbility has been a very rewarding experience for Healthcall Optical Services' staff. People with learning disabilities are as individual as any other member of society and should, of course, be treated as such. When a person is disadvantaged simply because they need spectacles but have never had the opportunity to have a sight test because practitioners are not able to fully assess them, action is required and this booklet is our attempt to address this situation."

The pack contains practical advice for practitioners as well as background information about learning disabilities. Practitioners can find out about using a "person first" approach when dealing with or discussing patients – they are 'a person with a learning disability' not 'a learning disabled person'. The pack looks at how to address issues that people may have about attending an optical practice. Practitioners can read about dealing with anxiety about an unfamiliar location, which, combined with a lack of understanding of what is going on can lead to a person with learning disabilities performing worse than they would do if relaxed.

Dawn Roberts continues, "The booklet commissioned on our behalf by Replay Learning is designed to be used by all optometrists and dispensing

opticians in order to provide them with proven ways of successfully examining patients with Learning Disabilities. This is something that we may all be required to do at times, but it is an area in which few of us have expertise; the booklet aims to provide solutions to this for both practitioners and support staff whether seeing the patient in a practice environment or in their home.” One of the authors of the pack, Gordon Ilett, adds, “We have known for many years that people with learning disabilities are more likely to need yet less likely to receive good quality eye care. The aim of this pack is to reassure optometrists that they already possess most of the skills needed to provide eye care to these patients, to reinforce those skills, and provide an easy reference guide to this service.”

Optometrists studying the material can get tips on communicating with people with learning disabilities, and find out about a useful tool developed by SeeAbility, the Pre Examination Questionnaire. Paula Spinks-Chamberlain explains, “We designed these forms because people with learning disabilities and those who supported them asked us to do so. The Pre Examination form entitled ‘Telling the optometrist about me’ is designed to be completed by before the sight test. The process enables people to prepare well for the test, plus it helps optometrists to know all of the important things about the person and how they may respond to certain situations. The ‘Feedback from the optometrist about my eye test’ form helps to share important details about the sight test with those who need to know. Often this information was being lost or not communicated effectively by those who supported the person to attend the sight test. Accurate and accessible information about how the person will see best, why glasses have been prescribed and when they will help is crucial.”

The pack goes on to explain about communicating during the examination and using pictures and sign language. It suggests that you, “Throw routine out of the window, and work in the order that is most appropriate for the patient” in order to ensure that vital tests have been completed if the patient becomes restless half way through. It will also help you brush up your knowledge of pathologies most likely to be present in people with learning disabilities: did you know that more than 15% of athletes examined at

Special Olympics UK had blepharitis, or that the incidence of visual field defects in people using the anti-epileptic drug with Vigabatrin may be as high as 40%?

Packed with handy and practical tips, the CET pack should be read by every practitioner to ensure that they, and their staff, are fully prepared when a person with learning disabilities needs an examination. Simple ideas, like ensuring recommendations and outcomes from the examination are written down can make a great difference to the person, as all their carers can then understand about their visual needs. Co-author Margaret Woodhouse says, My hope is that the pack will encourage more optometrists to build up expertise in providing eye care to people with learning disabilities and help widen access. Optometrists not wishing to specialise will have a better understanding of the issues, so that they feel able to refer potential patients to appropriate practitioners. In turn, this will lead to better eye care for this population and far fewer people with learning disability being additionally handicapped by poor eye sight.”

The pack has met with warm acclaim from the industry. David Hewlett, Chief Executive of FODO, says, “We are pleased to support SeeAbility in their campaign to improve services for people with learning disabilities and welcome these new CET tools. The authors Dr Woodhouse and Gordon Ilett are world experts in this field. In our view, it is a matter of equal treatment and human rights that people with learning disabilities should be able to have an eye examination at the practice of their choice in the same way as any other member of the community. We welcome all efforts to help us provide the best quality service we can for this much neglected group.”

Dawn Roberts concludes, “I hope that the information will prove to be a resource that is used for the benefit of patients and practitioners alike and draw the attention of professionals to the particular challenges surrounding the examination of this vulnerable section of our society and the adaptations to our routine that may be required in order to achieve a successful outcome.” Paula Spinks Chamberlain sums up, “Many people with a learning

disability will not know they have a sight problem and may not be able to communicate this to others. Unidentified sight problems can seriously affect someone's quality of life, lead to increased dependency and preventable blindness. My team and I aspire to shape better and more accessible eye care and vision services for people with learning disabilities across the UK. The eye 2 eye Campaign is all about making genuine change happen for people with learning disabilities and this CET resource will be of great value to this process."

Look Up [www.lookupinfo.org](http://www.lookupinfo.org) an education resource on eye care and vision for people with learning disabilities. Look Up provides information and advice to eye care and vision professionals on the needs of people who have a learning disability – and information and advice on the importance of eye care and vision to those who support people who have a learning disability. A pre examination form entitled 'Telling the Optometrist About Me' and a post examination form entitled 'Feedback from the Optometrist about my Eye Test' can be downloaded from [www.lookupinfo.org](http://www.lookupinfo.org).

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**Issued by SeeAbility. For further information please contact:  
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## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

- SeeAbility is the operating name for The Royal School for the Blind, a national charity which has for over 200 years provided support for people who are blind or partially sighted and have additional disabilities.
- SeeAbility currently provides a range of services in; Birmingham, Bristol, Devon, East Sussex, Hampshire, Humberside, London, Sheffield, Somerset, Surrey and West Sussex.
- SeeAbility offers a wide range of specialised residential, community and rehabilitation services for people with a visual impairment and additional disabilities. Our aim is to provide each individual with the support they need to develop essential life skills for greater independence and a fulfilling life.

- SeeAbility's eye 2 eye Campaign, a community-based initiative, is improving eye care and vision for people with a learning disability.
- Look-Up [www.lookupinfo.org](http://www.lookupinfo.org) provides information and advice on eye care and vision for people with learning disabilities.
- SeeAbility's Central Office is based in Epsom, Surrey. For further information call 01372 755000 or visit [www.seeability.org](http://www.seeability.org)

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i Valuing People A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century  
<http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm50/5086/5086.pdf>  
accessed 08/6/2009

ii The same as you? A review of services for people with learning disabilities  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/ldsr/docs/tsay-00.asp> accessed 8/6/2009  
Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability in Northern  
Ireland, <http://www.rmhdni.gov.uk/index/published-reports/learning-disability-report.htm>

iii Mencap Definition