

BBC Radio Sheffield, Breakfast Show Tuesday 23rd January 2018.

AUDIO: Sharon Hirshman.

INTERVIEWER: Toby Foster.

GUEST: Margaret Kilner, Chief Officer for Healthwatch Sheffield.

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CUE

Health and social care services in Sheffield are under fire over the way they treat Deaf people.

An investigation by the city's Healthwatch claim GP's, hospitals and others are discriminating against those with hearing problems.

Findings in the organisation's "Not Equal" report say service users are being left stressed, upset and angry over issues like a lack of interpreters.

Our reporter Jenny Eells went to meet Sharon Hirshman - a Deaf campaigner who raised funds to get the report commissioned.

SHARON: (Speaking through a British Sign Language interpreter)

"I've always been very pro-active, I've always campaigned for Deaf rights and Deaf access that's just who I am. I think we're sometimes seen as people who use a different language just as a people who use a foreign language are, but we are part of a Deaf community and we do have a disability.

There was a gentleman who wanted to book an interpreter for an appointment at hospital and this was to do with his heart, he was having heart problems.

His wife had taken him in the car and the gentleman walked into the appointment with his wife and they (*the staff) looked at his wife and said: "Oh Hi! Are you the interpreter for this gentleman?".

She said: "No, I'm his wife and I'm Deaf as well!" and they were saying: "Oh have we not got an interpreter?".

It turned out they didn't have an interpreter. This is a really serious problem that this gentleman's got with his heart and the staff" were looking round saying: "Oh well, where's the interpreter? What can we do?".

This could've been a matter of life or death for this particular gentleman and the just hadn't booked an interpreter!"

REPORTER:

"Do people end up feeling isolated and alone because of this?"

SHARON:

"Yeah...a lot of Deaf people feel: "What's the point of going to the doctors? What's the point of going to the hospital? Because they won't have booked an interpreter, I won't be able to talk to the professional! So I think a lot of them think: "I'm not bothered". So yes, they do become isolated and their health could deteriorate and their mental health could deteriorate as well because there's nothing for them, there's nobody helping them – why bother?"

It's not fair for the Deaf community. We end up trying to help each other within the Deaf community and try to think of ideas, you know, look online, try to read up on information, they ask friends for support. Sometimes people even try and get their hearing grand-children involved and try and help them communicate. I can give you a really sad example of that actually. There was a particular case a few years ago when there was a Deaf gentleman, a grandfather, who was in hospital. His daughter was also Deaf.

This particular gentleman was sadly dying of cancer and no interpreter was provided by the hospital so he ended up having to use his grandchildren to have to interpret for him and his daughter in hospital which is just so wrong!

It's so inappropriate. I, personally, feel that is abuse – it could be seen as abuse! *(End of Clip)*

TOBY:

The NHS Sheffield Clinical Commissioning Group and Sheffield Teaching Hospitals both say they welcome the Healthwatch report and are currently looking at how they can work together to make improvements.

Margaret Kilner is Chief Officer for Healthwatch Sheffield - they work with the public and patients to find out what problems they're facing.

Q) What prompted you to produce the report in the first place?

MARGARET:

We've worked really closely with the Deaf Advice Team at Citizen's Advice Sheffield and with Disability Sheffield. We have been receiving a lot of complaints from Deaf people that when they've been going to appointments interpreters weren't there and they were expected to either carry on the appointment without an interpreter, perhaps a family member was being used to interpret or sometimes the appointment was being cancelled which means that tests or treatments would be delayed.

TOBY:

Q) You would think that there would be technology, there would be something there that meant we wouldn't have to rely on interpreters?

MARGARET:

There is technology, there's something called "Sign Live" which is a video interpreting system but that's not suitable for everyone.

If you've got any problems with your sight, perhaps you're just not used to the technology. Also, people don't realise that British Sign Language has dialects just like spoken language so if

your interpreter's based up in Scotland you might find it really difficult to understand what your interpreter is saying.

TOBY:

Q) And just to give us a sense of the scale of the problem – what numbers are we talking here, how many people are affected?

MARGARET:

I think it's really difficult to say, I think there are about 600 people in Sheffield that are registered as Deaf. But we know there's an awful lot of people that are hard of hearing and that lose their hearing as they grow older.

TOBY:

Q) That throws up different difficulties doesn't it? Because if you lose your hearing as you grow older, you're not used to signing?

MARGARET:

Absolutely, we are aware there is a lot of social isolation for people who're hard of hearing and at one of our workshops we had a lot of hard of hearing people there and we heard about the different issues that they suffer from.

We also heard from Deaf Blind people and what Deaf Blind people told us is that there isn't the choice.

So Deaf Blind people need a certain type of interpreter, someone who is hard of hearing might need a hearing loop and a Deaf person that uses British Sign Language needs an interpreter so what we want the services to do is really listen to what Deaf people need, take notice of their communication needs and meet them.

TOBY:

Q) I have to examine this from all sides. I suppose there is something that says for the very small amount of people who're Deaf and can't read and we can't get through to them in some way – is it worth investing the money into interpreters if we're not going to use them that often?

MARGARET:

I think, like you say, it is a really small group so it's hard really to find an excuse NOT to do it. In Sheffield we are so lucky and a lot of us are really, really proud of the amazing services that we've got and thousands of people, health and social care professionals and support staff absolutely want to do their best for patients every day and yet what we've got is this very small group of people that can't access the care out through no fault of their own.

They've got no choice, they can't learn to hear spoken English,

TOBY:

Q) And I suppose as we go on the problem's going to get worse because as everybody gets older one of the things we do know is that hearing deteriorates?

MARGARET:

Yes I think it's really important for us as a local Healthwatch to make sure we are bringing these problems to the attention of local services. We know that local services are under pressure, we know they absolutely want to do the best for service users but not all voices are heard equally so for us it's really important to make sure that it is easy for services to do the right thing and that's why we've made some very clear recommendations that we want the services to meet.