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TX: YOU AND YOURS 12.02.03 - Waiting lists for NHS digital hearing aids

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ROBINSON

You and Yours has discovered that waiting lists for the new digital hearing aids can be as long as 33 months in some parts of England and in Scotland they're available only in a very few health trusts. That's despite the fact that the Scottish Parliament has just allocated money to provide them. The Government has promised digital hearing on the NHS for everyone who needs one by 2005. But it's also been gradually providing them district by district for over a year now. Peter White's been investigating the situation and he's here.

Peter, before we start, digital hearing aids why are they considered so important?

WHITE

Well they're nothing short of life changing really. If you're lucky enough to be able to get one and I don't tend to go in for that kind of hyperbole. The point is they can be adjusted very specifically to allow for your particular kind of hearing loss - whether you've lost higher or lower frequency, for instance, they can even be adjusted to take account of your lifestyle, whether you need them in one-to-one situations or are the kind of person who works in a crowded office or you go to meetings. It begins to get over that problem, so many people with a hearing loss refer to where all noise is amplified with analogue hearing aids not just the noise you want to hear. So on our last report we had people saying I can now chair meetings again. We had a clock mender telling us how he could now hear the ticking of the clocks for the first time for years, that's how important it is.

ROBINSON

There is very good news on that front though isn't there?

WHITE

Yeah there is potentially. The Department of Health has announced a further £94 million, which they say will enable all health trusts in England to be offering digital hearing aids, as opposed to just those who'd got funding for pilot schemes. The trouble is we know that even in those areas where they are available the waiting lists are horrendous. In our previous report we said that the Audit Commission had found enormous variations in the waiting time for just an assessment, not a fitting an assessment. The biggest they'd found was 18 months. Well many You and Yours listeners, after our report, got in touch to say oh we can beat that, including Mrs Helen Figgins who lives in the New Forest who was initially given a waiting time of getting on for three years for an assessment.

FIGGINS

At 81 having to wait 33 months from referral is a bit much, 2005 is the best I can hope for. I was referred last May, so it's getting on for a year already. It's a long time and it's frustrating.

WHITE

Well we spoke to the New Forest primary healthcare trust, which expressed regret but said it was a new trust which had inherited a long waiting list and it was doing its best to get the figures down.

ROBINSON

So is the New Forest one of the worst places to be if you're deaf, I mean are there places that are managing to supply these digital hearing aids very much more quickly?

WHITE

Oh yeah there are some that are supplying them more quickly. In places of excellence you can hear waiting times of two months. But of course it's by no means the worst place either, at least they're offering digital hearing aids. In Scotland you stand virtually no chance of being offered them. The Royal National Institute for Deaf people tell us that only just over one per cent of people who could benefit from digital hearing aids in Scotland have got them, in fact Scotland has been dubbed the worst place in Britain to be deaf and a report from the Public Health Institute of Scotland has just made 43 recommendations which need to be put in place to update the audiology service. The Scottish Parliament has pledged £10 million but the report says that it would actually take between 30 and 50 million just to bring the service up to an acceptable standard.

ROBINSON

Well one of the authors of that report is Gordon McHardy and he is audiology manager at Grampian University Hospital's NHS Trust. He's in our Aberdeen studio. How bad is the situation in Scotland for people waiting for a digital hearing aid?

MCHARDY

I think it probably varies from area to area. The main problem has been under-investment in the services over the years and there are general problems with lack of staff and facilities that are maybe 10, 20, 30 years old and need to be upgraded to make them appropriate for purpose.

ROBINSON

So is it that if you go to your GP and ask to be referred there's just no one to refer you to - is that the problem?

MCHARDY

No there are departments that you can be referred to but it's the volume of numbers that becomes the problem. Part of the problem is with an ever ageing population, it's an increased number of patients being referred to us and our existing patients are living longer and therefore that all adds to the demands on the service.

ROBINSON

I'm told that with these hearing aids the assessment itself is very lengthy.

MCHARDY

Yes the initial - digital hearing aids won't necessarily be the answer for everyone and therefore there's a need to accurately assess patients and decide whether or not digital technology would be the most appropriate for an individual. Following on from that assessment there then has to be the fitting of the digital hearing aid and various tests carried out just to make sure that the hearing aid has been fitted appropriately and is the optimum for the patient. So yes it is a far lengthier process than what we're used to.

ROBINSON

These digital hearing aids are very expensive - at least a £1,000 if you go for them privately - but they're being supplied to the NHS, as I understand it, for less than a hundred pounds a piece. Now the Assembly's saying that you could have 10 million - is that enough?

MCHARDY

It's a start. I think the important thing for most departments - I think learning from the English experience - is to get the infrastructure right, get databases and equipment in place that will allow us to accurately assess people and thereafter, if it's appropriate, fit digital hearing aids properly and, as I said, to the optimum for that individual.

ROBINSON

Gordon McHardy we must leave it there but we will be returning to that issue later on in the programme.

ROBINSON

If you heard the start of the programme you'll know that we reported on the long waiting lists for digital hearing aids on the NHS. These lists can be as long as 33 months in areas where the money is supposed to be available. But Scotland is the worst area to be. There your chances of getting a digital hearing aid are apparently virtually nil. Well Mary Mulligan is the deputy health minister at the Scottish Parliament and she joins us now.

You've just allocated £10 million to this, I'm told audiologists claim that they need about 40 million, is there any way that you can meet those claims?

MULLIGAN

We don't envisage the monies we've just announced covering all the needs that have been identified, what we do see this money as doing is providing a start for those health boards who have to look at the service they've been providing and see how it needs to change and whether that's equipment or staffing needs and assisting them to do that, so that we can address the need that's been identified in the PHIS report.

ROBINSON

The things the audiologists talk about in that report - the lack of staff, the lack of basic facilities - I'm told that in some clinics the actual acoustics of the clinic are so poor that it's impossible really to assess someone's hearing properly. Are they all problems you knew about?

MULLIGAN

I think they were problems that were being flagged up to us, we weren't totally sure where it was a picture across the whole of the country or whether it was just isolated incidents and that's why we needed the report to give us a clear understanding of what the needs were. We cannot defend situations where that - as you've described it and therefore we want to try and do something about that.

ROBINSON

So what's going to happen now?

MULLIGAN

Well the money that has been announced - the £10 million - will assist with new equipment, it will also assist with staff training and re-devising the strategies for delivering the service, so as to address those kind of long waits that you've just referred to. We think that working with the health boards, who now have a clear indication of what the needs are in their local areas, as well as nationally, we will be able to improve the situation and ensure that people who have hearing problems can have those problems addressed.

ROBINSON

Well you talked about strategies for delivering the services needing to be assessed. It has been claimed that Scotland's the worst place in Britain to be deaf, how soon before that changes?

MULLIGAN

Well I want to see changes immediately starting to happen. We announced monies last year to deal with the waiting times, we've announced monies in January of this year to deal with the equipment and now we've announced an additional set of monies to really pump start any other needs that are out there. And I would want to see health boards now responding to this report in a positive way.

ROBINSON

Give us a timescale, I mean all these statements - respond in a positive way, let's put strategies in place - how long before people can go to their GP in Scotland and get a new digital hearing fairly quickly, within say six months even?

MULLIGAN

People should be able to go to their GP now and be referred to their audiology unit.

ROBINSON

But how long will they have to wait, that's the point isn't it?

MULLIGAN

Well the waiting times vary at the moment. What we're saying is that the additional 8 million that has been announced is over a four year period, within that time we would expect people to be able to see the audiology specialists within a reasonable time.

ROBINSON

Mary Mulligan many thanks.