

# Members' Corner

## *Henry Skinner, Action on Hearing Loss and Interpreter Emma*



George welcomed the guest speaker Henry Skinner, representing Action on Hearing Loss – previously known as RNID.

Henry himself is deaf and was therefore assisted in his presentation by his interpreter Emma. The organisation is a charity and provides a range of services and products, like telephone amplifiers, flashing doorbells, vibrating alarm clocks etc.

### Some Statistics about Deafness

Henry began by presenting some statistical information:

- Currently there are 10 million people in the UK who are deaf or hard of hearing (that is 1 in 6 of the population). 6.4 million of these are of retirement age and older.
- 400,000 rely on lip reading
- 150,000 were born with their hearing but have been deafened over time.
- 2 million wear hearing aids.
- 50,000 to 70,000 in the UK use British Sign Language.

### Causes of Hearing Loss

- 1) Some suffer hearing loss as a result of issues of the outer ear.
- 2) Others suffer sensorineural deafness such as from presbycusis, which is age-related hearing loss and affects 90% of those over the age of 80.
- 3) Deafness can also be caused by diseases such as Rubella, drugs, exposure to loud noises in the workplace or in a social context eg Rock Concert, or even as a result of head injury.
- 4) There are also some medical conditions which affect the hearing such as Meniere's Disease, tinnitus and recurring hearing infections.
- 5) Deafness can also be hereditary.
- 6) It is widely recognised that regular exposure to noise in excess of 80 dBA can seriously damage hearing.

### Loss of Communication – Workplace Issues

Hearing loss can be a significant barrier to communication, especially within the workplace. Often people not affected are unaware of how to communicate with those who are deaf or hard of hearing. Information that is widely available to those with hearing, for example via radio, television, or even general conversation, is lost to the deaf. Those with hearing often fail to appreciate what it must be like to be without this vital sense. Many deaf people say they regularly

experience impatience from others and sometimes people will just walk away from them. This is frustrating to both parties.

### **How to Communicate**

When communicating with a deaf person it is important to:

- face the person and ensure that the lighting is sufficient for them to be able to lip read.
- don't eat, chew or obscure your face when you are speaking.
- introduce the topic of the conversation. This will help to avoid confusion or misunderstandings.
- try not to use jargon and get the point over in the simplest way.
- be patient, and above all don't shout!

Helpfully, technology allows for communication in the written form via text and e-mails. Loop systems are also available for use with the telephone.

### **Social Isolation**

People with hearing loss can very quickly become socially isolated. Those around them may be talking very quickly or over each other, or there may be distracting background noise. This causes a great deal of embarrassment and unease to the deaf person. Eventually they will simply consider it too much of a struggle to keep up with the conversation and so withdraw. Everyday life, such as shopping or being in a train station can become very difficult. Even a visit to the GP can prove to be particularly difficult and arranging an appointment by telephone impossible.

### **MP3 Players**

Steve Parton raised the question about people in noisy workplaces using MP3 players set at high volume and what an employer should do. Henry confirmed that there are a number of guidelines available to employers about safe noise levels and how to educate the workforce as to how to protect their hearing from dangerous levels.

### **Audible Fire Alarms**

Mark Hoare raised the problem of audible fire alarms in buildings. Henry responded that some areas do have the flashing light system. In hospitals there is the 'buddy' system where a member of staff is assigned to a deaf person and alerts them to any danger. Also, the actions of others would help alert the deaf person if they all seem to be rushing in the same direction.

### **Construction Sites and Wearing Ear Defenders**

Another question from the floor referred to workers on construction sites being disadvantaged by ear defenders and asked whether there was any other sensory equipment available to signal danger. Henry advised that many companies use pager or mobile telephone systems which can vibrate in the pocket to alert the worker of any danger.

George thanked Henry, in conjunction with Emma, for his most interesting and thought-provoking presentation.