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To disclose or not to disclose? Workplace experiences of healthcare professionals with specific learning difficulties: transition from education to employment

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Relevance: This survey investigated the experiences of nurses, physiotherapists and a variety of allied health professionals (AHP) employed by the National Health Service (NHS) related to specific learning difficulties (SpLD). Understanding issues faced by those with a SpLD in the context of the workplace and the impact on access to continuing professional development (CPD) has the potential to impact on practice and career progression making it relevant to Congress Theme 2.

Purpose: To explore the experiences of nurses and AHPs with a SpLD in the NHS workplace.

Methods/analysis: This was the final phase of a 3-phase evaluation. A questionnaire survey was used to investigate the experiences of nurses and AHPs, with a SpLD, working in the NHS and their transitions from education to employment. Questions were developed from the qualitative findings of phase 2, which investigated these issues in physiotherapy. Participants were recruited using social media and email via NHS North West, Higher Education Institution (HEI) and other gatekeepers. Data were summarised using tables, histograms and pie charts. Open text comments were analysed using thematic analysis. Ethical approval was gained from Manchester Metropolitan University.

Results: As a student, more participants disclosed their SpLD to their HEI than did not disclose. However, on clinical placement and on application for an NHS post fewer disclosed and there was an even split between disclosure/non-disclosure. Once in employment, the trend was towards disclosure. Non-disclosure was related to fears of discrimination; of negative perceptions that might be held by others and that the use of assistive technology would lessen their worth in the eyes of others. Participants did not report less favourable treatment compared to non-dyslexic peers, nor did they consider that less was expected from them. Most had not experienced bullying and enjoyed supportive relationships with their co-workers. However, whilst students in HEIs benefited from academic support on campus, the same adjustment was not available on placement in NHS Trusts and once they had made transition to the workplace. Over a third of respondents felt their SpLD impacted on their ability to engage with CPD. Respondents felt that they had to ask for reasonable adjustment rather than have it provided automatically once the need was recognised.

Discussion and conclusions: Data from the survey suggests that disclosure of SpLD to HEI and to employers is likely, whilst disclosure on placement and on application for employment is less likely. This seems to be related to fears of discrimination and negative perceptions that might be held by others. Non-disclosure is a barrier to the provision of reasonable adjustment.

Impact and implications: Lack of reasonable adjustment related to non-disclosure or failure to provide reasonable adjustment is a potential issue for those with SpLD. It may be that career progression/success in funded CPD opportunities is impeded because some with SpLD do not have access to reasonable adjustment/assistive technology.

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