



Riders in the Storm:
Medical Professionals with Hearing Loss
As Leaders in the Professional Field

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Riders in the Storm: An Introduction

If you have a hearing loss, belong to the Association of Medical Professionals with Hearing Losses (AMPHL) and participate in the international electronic mail listserv NOISE (Network for Overcoming Increased Silence Effectively), you may be interested in discovering how your efforts are reaching far beyond your own shores.

My own contact with AMPHL began just over two years ago, when I met the current AMPHL President Dr. Candice Barrere during a short research trip to the United States. At that time I was leading a United Kingdom (UK) government-funded project entitled "Opening the Stable Door-The Veterinary Profession and People with Disabilities."

"Opening the Stable Door" was so successful that when it ended in December 2002, further funding was given for a new three project entitled DIVERSE-"Disability in Veterinary Education: Resources for Sustainable Enhancement." As a collaborative initiative between the UK veterinary schools, with input from colleagues in medical and dental schools, DIVERSE is already setting in motion a disability revolution across the UK's professions.

The impact upon me of these exciting developments, and the extent to which AMPHL has contributed to them, suddenly became startlingly clear in an unexpected way.



Anne Tynan at RCVS, London

A recent vivid dream made me realise the extent to which my life is now dominated by disability, even though I do not-yet-have a disability myself. In my dream, a number of us were riding at a canter through a forest. Conditions were far from ideal, but even a freezing fog could not slow our pace. Although visibility was limited, our internal vision was perfect. We would all have preferred not to have to set out on this journey, but having made our decision, we were excited by the thrilling fear of our own commitment. The knowledge that others depended upon this journey-a journey that they were not able to undertake themselves-sharpened our determination to complete it.

Reflecting upon the dream, I instantly realised that the Officers, Directors and supporters of AMPHL were also with me on this journey-or rather, I was with them. Two years after I first made contact with AMPHL, it suddenly

became clear to me how this organisation fits into the worldwide quest for the most ambitious professional opportunities for disabled people ever imagined.

The Status of Hearing Loss within the Broader Field of Disability

Before explaining my view of AMPHL within the broader context, it is worthwhile giving readers an account of how hearing loss appears to fit into the broader picture of all disabilities as often viewed by "the public"-a wonderful generalisation which takes in the man, woman and child in the street of London, Glasgow, Amsterdam, Madrid, New York, Washington DC, Bangkok, Tunis and a multitude of other cities and villages around the globe. For the past ten years, I have interviewed people of all ages in both formal and informal settings in these and many other cities so this is a "10-year stock-taking exercise" that I hope will benefit JAMPHL readers. Even though the issue of hearing loss (or impairment, the term usually used in the UK) was only occasionally the main focus of such interviews, it is surprising how much will be said within the context of a general conversation about disability.

Readers of AMPHL's journal, JAMPHL, will undoubtedly be very familiar already with the ways in which non-disabled people react to hearing loss. However, it may be of interest to set this within a broader context. I think that all of the observations that follow have some impact upon the degree to which people with hearing loss are accepted as medical professionals.

- Hearing loss tends to be associated only with older people. Many people do not think that they have ever met a young person who has a hearing impairment.
- Hearing loss is perceived to be much easier to live with than visual impairment-the two are invariably compared.
- As a result, many people "don't see what the problem is" with hearing loss. They believe that it is their sight rather than their hearing ability that gets them through life.
- When asked to explain why people rarely comment on the fact that someone is wearing (eye)glasses but nearly always comment on the wearing of a hearing aid, most people are suddenly lost for words!
- They are also noticeably silent when it comes to questioning anyone with a hearing aid about their hearing loss, although they have no such qualms about someone who is wearing (eye)glasses. (However, there do appear to be national differences.) A British colleague reported "English people are far too polite to ask me about my hearing aid. By contrast, people in Spain and Italy always want to know everything down to the last detail. They seem to be more aware that hearing impairment will almost certainly visit them when they get older and want to make sure that they get the best equipment available. I find this helpful because it seems to diminish the importance of my own deafness."
- People who use sign language are sometimes thought to be "the most deaf of all." Interviewees report feelings of total inadequacy and exclusion when they come into contact with two or more people using sign language.
- People who have a hearing impairment are sometimes reported to be "far more difficult to deal with" than those who are visually impaired. My experience leads me to suspect that this has more to do with interviewees' own inadequacies with communication than with any faults in those who have a hearing loss.
- The idea that one might find students at a university-let alone at medical, dental or veterinary school-who have a severe hearing loss, still seems to shock. The widespread assumption still is that anyone born with a severe level of disability is automatically disqualified from receiving a higher education.
- When asked about people with hearing loss working as medical professionals, many members of the public do not perceive any serious difficulties. A typical attitude is "if the profession lets them practise, it must be because they are okay. I would have much more of a problem if a doctor was blind."
- Interestingly, this attitude seems to diminish in proportion to people's level of education. People with a supposedly higher level of education are sometimes the most resistant to the idea of people with any type of disability working in mainstream professions. On occasions, I have even been advised to spend my time developing more possibilities for "segregated employment" rather than "wasting time trying to fit square pegs into round holes."
- This open-minded attitude also contrasts with the typical reactions within the medical professions, where the phrases "taking a case history," "health and safety" and "a danger to themselves and others" are the ones that trip off people's tongues at the speed of light.

The Status of Hearing Loss within the UK Medical Professions

Despite the reservations just described within the medical professions, the UK is witnessing the contrasting phenomenon of increasing numbers of applications to UK veterinary schools by students who have a hearing impairment. Based within a veterinary school, I can certainly report that more enquiries are received from potential applicants who have a hearing loss than from those with any other type of disability. The demands of confidentiality prevent me from giving further details about applicants or students who have a hearing loss, but it is possible to confirm that staff involved in admissions no longer dismisses it as "an impossible disability."



Anne Tynan at the World Veterinary Congress

Although my experience and knowledge of medical and dental schools and their respective professions are, as yet, limited, I was recently able to carry out what I described as an "introductory study" which provided considerable insight into how these professions operate and what their attitudes towards disabled people might be. The study, "Pushing the Boat Out," was funded by LTSN-01, the UK Learning and Teaching Support Network Subject Centre for Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine. Within this study, I examined the information made available on the schools' websites and compared this with the policies of the relevant professional bodies-the General Medical Council (GMC), the General Dental Council (GDC) and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). (Readers can obtain the report directly from the LTSN-01 website at <http://www.ltsn-01.ac.uk> or email them at enquiries@ltsn-01.ac.uk.)

Responses to the report are still coming in at the time of writing this article (April 2003), and these will no doubt shed further light upon the issues. Of relevance to this article, however, is the fact that hearing loss is generally referred to only by implication when schools and the professional bodies' policy documents refer to the need for students to have "good communication and listening skills." This is a constant leitmotif and one that I have challenged in several instances within the above report. Without prejudging the responses still to come, I am confident from those already received that "the veterinary school phenomenon" will be repeated-i.e., enquiries from students with hearing loss will be found to be very much on the increase among those wishing to apply to medical and dental schools.

The Unique Contribution of AMPHL

It is surely no coincidence that these developments have taken place simultaneous to the development of AMPHL. The year 2000 marked the start of AMPHL and also the start of work in the UK to open up the veterinary profession to applicants and students with disabilities. This parallel development has meant that AMPHL has become a guiding star for me in opening up all the professions to people with disabilities. The interest and enthusiasm that "Pushing the Boat Out" has provoked among university colleagues working in other professional disciplines has demonstrated the enormous potential of the guiding star of AMPHL.

How would I sum up this unique contribution? I hope that readers will appreciate that the following comments are made with a view of giving an objective external assessment, rather than as the flattery of any individual.

Moral support

If having a disability can be a challenging experience, trying to promote the rights of those with disabilities can be equally challenging. The very existence and rapid development of AMPHL is a strong incentive to continue when faced with opposition, ignorance or fear.

Professional commitment

Witnessing the growth of AMPHL has allowed me to witness the professional dedication of those involved. As someone who is not a medical professional, it has been very formative to see how the professionalism demanded by the medical professions has been maintained by AMPHL. Given that I constantly state, "the presence of people with disabilities within the medical professions will inevitably raise standards," it has been reassuring to see how this is done by AMPHL.

Information

Apart from the resources available on the AMPHL website (to which I constantly refer people), the information provided by AMPHL supporters via the emails distributed by NOISE is of an incalculable value. I am there as a privileged and silent witness as NOISE participants explain their successes and failures, give an account of other people's reactions or ask for advice on how to manage some of the technological aids.

Riders in the Storm: Medical Professionals with Hearing Loss as Leaders in the Professional Field

Of all the practical information provided, however, there is one piece of information that towers above all others.

This is the fact that you are all there; scattering to the four winds the ancient idea that people with hearing loss cannot work as medical professionals. As the four winds spread far and wide the fact of your existence, they bring to many other professions the challenge and the hope of disability.

After "Pushing the Boat Out" was published in March 2003, I was contacted almost immediately by a journalist from the UK Times Higher Education Supplement (<http://www.thes.co.uk>) who wrote a piece in Edition 1,582 on March 28, 2003, entitled "Vet schools to eye up access." A photograph of an abattoir bore the caption "Slaughterhouse drive: abattoirs will be consulted about disabled access to vet medicine." It certainly caught the eye of colleagues working in a multitude of departments within the UK's universities.

What caught my ear when speaking to the journalist was that one idea was clearly beginning to dawn upon her—the idea that if people with disabilities could work in the veterinary, medical and dental professions, they could work in any profession. If professions previously thought to be "no-go" areas for disabled people proved to be open to them, this has an instant impact upon their potential role in all the professions.



RCVS Working Party 2002 (Anne Tynan is third from the left)

It is from this perspective that you are the Riders in the Storm. The horses represent both your hearing loss and

your particular professional calling within the scope of the medical professions. The forest is simultaneously the world through which you move and the life ahead of you. The freezing fog represents the cold indifference of many who discriminate against you and also the misty ignorance of those who have yet to meet and to understand disability face to face.

As leaders within the medical and healthcare professions, you are also simultaneously beating a path to all professions for other people with disabilities. To see you serving society through and not despite your hearing loss will change forever society's perception of all who have a disability.

You may not have time to reflect on this now but future generations will look back with pride when they see what you have done. The report, "Pushing the Boat Out," concluded with the phrase "Let's Roll!" but now I say "Let's Ride!"

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Relevant publications by Anne are as follows:

Pushing the Boat Out: An Introductory Study of Admissions to UK Medical, Dental & Veterinary Schools for Applicants with Disabilities. (2003). LTSN-01 (The Learning and Teaching Support Network Subject Centre for Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine), University of Newcastle upon Tyne, ISBN 0 7017 0154 4. (Obtainable from the LTSN-01 website at <http://www.ltsn-01.ac.uk> or email enquiries@ltsn-01.ac.uk.)

At the Portal of the Profession: The Veterinary Profession and People with Disabilities-A North American Perspective. (2001). The Royal Veterinary College, University of London. (Obtainable from the website, <http://www.rvc.ac.uk>, or by emailing Anne Tynan, atynan@rvc.ac.uk.)

Guide for Students with Disabilities. (2000, reprint 2002). The Royal Veterinary College, University of London. (Obtainable from the website or from Anne Tynan as above.)

Adventures in Disability. (1997). Tynan Publishing, ISBN 0 9530430 0 2. (Obtainable from <http://amazon.co.uk> or directly from the author.)