

My GP visit as a blind person.

Life as a blind man has many challenges (and rewards) but it seems to me that some things are getting more difficult as technology is added to make life easier. Accessing the healthcare and specifically GP surgeries is an example of this. In an attempt at full disclosure I am registered blind but I am not completely blind. I have no central vision which makes it difficult for me to read or focus on objects. I do have normal peripheral vision which means I can kind of see where I'm going. Like a lot of blind people I don't walk with a white stick, have a guide dog or wear sunglasses all the time. This is only important because it sets the scene and context. If you saw me on the street you wouldn't instantly know I was blind.

From a health perspective I am quite lucky and don't go to the GP's very often. I suppose this is a double edged sword because it means I don't know the environment very well.

Challenges

My GP surgery is a 1990's construction and is all level access and if I'm honest this is where the problems start for me. There is an access ramp leading to the front door but because of my eye condition I have no depth perception and trip over it almost every time I've been! I'm then faced with a large glass door with arrows on it, facing to the left. I can see the arrows but can't work out if it means the door goes left or I should. As it turns out the door goes left so you walk through the right side of the entrance to be faced with another door which is the exact opposite. Apparently this is to increase the heating efficiency of the building but it certainly doesn't help me get into reception.

The next challenge is letting the doctor know you are there. The reception desk only has one receptionist and so has a massive queue. You are supposed to use the automatic check in machine but there are several problems with this. Firstly I can't see where the machine is and secondly I can't read the instructions on the machine anyway. So I stand in the queue, and listen to the receptionist tell me I should use the machine (that I can't use).

When my time comes to see the doctor my name appears on a screen that I can't read so I generally sit and wait until the doctor uses the loudspeaker system and says my name and which room I need to go to. This then leaves me with a challenge because I'm faced with a long corridor with rooms off either side. Each room has a number on it and the doctor's name, neither of which I can read unless I am about 5 inches away from it. This means I bounce between doors, appearing to almost touch them with my head before moving on to the next. It must look hilarious or ridiculous to anyone watching! The real problem is that all this takes time and as you only get 7 minutes from start to finish I can be left with almost no time when I finally get to the right place.

To be fair, all the doctors I've seen at the surgery have been fantastic. Very friendly and helpful once I've explained why it took me 5 minutes to get from the reception to their room but it would be so much easier if I didn't have to explain this each time because it isn't why I'm at the doctors. Being blind is part of who I am and can't be changed so it is never why I'm

there. My 7 minutes has now reduced even further due to the “” blind “ conversation. It’s also amazing how many times doctors ask you “how long has it looked like that” which is a difficult question to answer if you can’t see it!

A few Solutions

There are solutions to this problem, for instance I often take my wife with me but we both work full time and different shift patterns which severely limits the potential appointment times. I’m sure I could ask a friend to come with me but that would be weird! Friends are for the pub, gym and pizza night! I could ask the receptionist for help but they are very busy and also I don’t want everyone in reception to know I’m blind.

In my day to day life I’ve used a number of tech solutions to help me get by. Until the last couple of years I used to use a handheld electronic magnifier which had a camera and a built in screen. This worked well for reading documents but was big and heavy to carry around.

My iphone is now able to do the same job with a much clearer screen. I use the built in magnifier which you can access by clicking the side button 3 times. I like it because it’s quick to access and can be used subtly. I’ve tried using the magnifier on my phone to read the TV screen in reception but it’s really hard to get it focused in right and people around you in reception can get a little funny because it looks like you are filming the screen with everyone’s name on it. I know there are apps out there which can convert text to speech but I haven’t really experimented with them. They seem quite expensive and there is no way of knowing how good they are before you buy them.

I use the map function on my phone to get around the street all the time, the audio directions come through the headphones so nobody knows i’m hearing them. I’ve heard that some public buildings like airports now have maps available that can be used in the same way but I haven’t tried any yet.

I’m sure there is a technological solution to this problem but I don’t know if it should be on the side of the doctor / receptionist or patient.