
TX: 13.03.03 – NHS STILL FAILING TO DETECT DEAFNESS IN CHILDREN

PRESENTER: JOHN WAITE

For over 40 years now most newborn children have been tested for deafness by the same method, it's called the infant distraction test, which makes it sound far more scientific than it actually is - someone claps their hand or shakes a rattle near the child and the medical staff just note whether or not the baby seems to respond. It's positively archaic in today's NHS world of scanners and lasers and notoriously unreliable. So deafness can go undetected or indeed by wrongly detected. Either way it's damaging and distressing for the child and the family and expensive for the NHS. And yet a much more reliable diagnosis system is available, has been available for 10 years, for a few thousand pounds - pocket money for the health service - so why aren't we using it?

Simon Brookes's daughter Lauren is one of the children whose deafness was not detected by the rattle test.

ACTUALITY
Tell daddy what that is?

[child noise]

Tell daddy what that is?

[child noise]

BROOKES
When she was first born they didn't seem to do any type of hearing test at all initially. She had a 14 - 10 to 14 day review when I think they checked her hearing, which consisted of me sitting her on a lap shaking the rattle either side behind her and if she turned round it was assumed that she could hear well, if she didn't turn round it seemed to be assumed that she was messing about really - that's what babies do, they ignore people. And then she had that test done at six to eight weeks and then again at six to nine months. It was around I think about six to nine months test when we went - I can remember one instance - when I went to the surgery in Newark and she was sat on my lap and I actually started to notice, for the first time, that she wasn't picking up things that I thought she should be and I actually pointed out - I said well I'm not happy with how she's performed on this test. And it was put to me that well we're in a noisy room, the road's close by, there's lots of people in the room and children tend to ignore people or that's what babies do. And it was sort of left as that and I walked out thinking okay then. And then we got her home we started to realise that she was sitting on the carpet playing with her toys or watching the tele and you could walk straight past her and she wouldn't bat an eyelid. She was sent away again for a further hearing test with some more scientific equipment, came back as yes she has got a serious problem with her hearing and then from there we had further appointments and appointments and within a few months she'd been fitted with hearing aids. Lauren was 18 months old before she was actually diagnosed, so she was quite old by the time

they actually said yes there is a problem with it. She must have been about two by the time she got hearing aids, so she's lost two years of language and sounds and learning about the environment around her.

It's blatantly obvious when you go to friends' houses who have got children who are the same age, she's got a friend who's half a year younger than her and you can sit and have a conversation with him, whereas Lauren can't do that, she can't hold a conversation with you. I think me and Nicola are about the only two people that can actually understand her properly now. She's starting to string sentences along but she's coming on for four now.

It seems crazy to me that in today's world the way that a little baby's hearing's tested is by sitting them on the lap and having a rattle shook next to their head.

WAITE
Simon Brookes. Well Susan Daniels is chief executive of the National Deaf Children's Society. Susan Daniels how many deaf children are not diagnosed by the rattle test - the distraction test?

DANIELS
There are 840 children who are born deaf each year and over half of these are not identified until they're 18 months old and a further quarter are not identified until they're three. So that means roughly one to two babies in every thousand have a severe hearing loss.

WAITE
And what is the problem with the distraction test, why isn't it reliable?

DANIELS
The infant distraction test varies hugely. In some areas where it's working well it might pick up 80 per cent of cases, in other areas it's only 18 per cent of cases, so there's a huge variety. The reason it doesn't work well is babies can often use their senses to detect movement around them and can be very clever and pass the distraction test but in fact subsequently turn out to have a hearing loss.

WAITE
So things like perfume or other movements in the room these can distract the baby and make the baby appear to be responding to sound?

DANIELS
That's absolutely correct, yes.

WAITE
So what impact does failing to diagnose deafness at an early age have on a child's development?

DANIELS
The main issue for tiny babies and for their families is around language and communication. Deafness has a huge impact on this. So if I give you a very specific example, a three year old hearing child will have around 700 words, a baby who hasn't yet been diagnosed as being deaf will only have 25 words. So that impact on language and communication just cannot be underestimated.

WAITE
And can last through life, certainly through early life?

DANIELS

Indeed and if there is early identification then deaf children can develop language and communication at an equivalent rate to their hearing peers. So you can see that there can be a huge impact if it's not picked up early.

WAITE
So this new technology, although it's not new, it's been around for 10 years, this device for detecting deafness that is so much better, how does it work?

DANIELS
It's a very, very simple test. It's an earpiece which is inserted in the baby's ear - remember this happens at hours just after birth, unlike the distraction test which is eight months later - a simple earpiece which is inserted in the ear, the baby just needs to be settled, there's an echo which is sent into the cochlea, a screener using a computer can monitor whether there's an echo coming back and that will be able to tell whether there is a need for the baby to be referred for subsequent testing. Very simple, very cheap and very quick to do.

WAITE
Well the Government says it hopes that this new test will be available nationwide by April 2005. How do you feel about that - is that soon enough?

DANIELS
The National Deaf Children's Society has been campaigning for the introduction of newborn screening for over 10 years. Parents of deaf children really want to know if they have a deaf child. We want this to happen as quickly as possible because in those 10 years while we've been waiting for this test to be implemented 8,000 babies have been born deaf, 4,000 of those haven't been identified by 18 months and a further quarter haven't been identified by three and a half. We believe that every child that is not identified this is a tragic waste of an opportunity for that child to maximise their potential. So these are statistics that we have to change, we've got the potential now to do that with new technology, we can't wait any longer, any delay to the timetable is unacceptable.

WAITE
Susan Daniels, chief executive of the National Deaf Children's Society. Well we did contact the Department of Health this morning who say the new equipment is being gradually introduced, so problems are ironed out before it's used everywhere, although, as you heard, it's been around for 10 years you'd have thought any problems might have been noted. They say, however, they need suitable support in place and time to train staff.