

There Needs to be a Conversation about Aphasia

M. Quinn

Irish National Audit of Stroke Governance Committee

Dear Sirs,

As someone that has battled with aphasia following a stroke, I was saddened to read and hear that Bruce Willis has been diagnosed with the condition. I wish him well in his retirement and hope that he gets all the support that he needs. Following reports in the media about the condition it is clear however that there needs to be a conversation about aphasia. There needs to be accurate reporting and a clear explanation of the two distinct types of aphasia. The most common one results from acute brain trauma such as stroke¹, and the other results from a degenerative brain condition, such as dementia, which is referred to as Primary Progressive Aphasia or PPA. The latter one is what Bruce Willis has sadly been diagnosed with.

Unfortunately some of what I have seen and heard in the media does not clearly explain the difference and for those like myself who developed the condition following a stroke or a brain injury, it makes for uncomfortable reading. I have seen The Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists (<https://www.iaslt.ie/>) speak out on social media to ask people to check out their website for the correct information on aphasia along with the Aphasia Home Café and professionals such as Dr. Helen Kelly of the School of Clinical Therapies in UCC and Dr. Molly Manning, of the School of Allied Health at UL. This is to be greatly welcomed.

As a stroke survivor I have advocated on behalf of the patient to ensure that the patients voice is heard and in this regard it is vital that the patients voice is also heard to stress that aphasia is a language/communication disability and that aphasia itself does not impact cognition¹. It most commonly has acute onset following a stroke and in fact affects one in three with stroke. This begs the question as to how well we care for this cohort of people that suffer with aphasia, but I guess that is a question for another day.....or is it?

What concerns me is that some aspects of reporting following the diagnosis of Bruce Willis negates aphasia advocates who stress that cognition/intelligence are NOT affected. For those of us with aphasia it is a form of hidden disability, not obvious until beginning to speak. It doesn't affect intelligence. We know what we want to say but can't always find the words/sentence structures needed to express ourselves. Therefore accurate reporting is essential.

Aphasia can be linked to neurodegenerative diseases such as what Bruce Willis has been diagnosed with but most aphasia is not progressive. For anyone watching the soap Emmerdale, you may have noticed that Marlon is having trouble communicating and is receiving speech and language therapy. Those of us that suffer with the condition will relate fully to the storyline in the programme. I hope that my short contribution on this can lead to a greater conversation on aphasia so that there is accuracy and precision in the information reported and that the patients voice is heard in all circumstances.

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