

Myths about blindness

“They want to register me as blind but I am not blind!”

“They told me I would not go blind with macular degeneration but now they say I should be on the blind register!”

“My mother is supposed to be blind but she can see the tiniest piece of wool on the floor!”

There is a huge difference between the common understanding of the word “blindness” and the true definition of the word, and this can lead to much confusion and distress. The popular belief is that blindness means having no sight at all and that being blind is like being in a completely dark room with no glimmer of light. In actual fact this is very rare, and most blind people have some useful vision. Many patients attending the Low Vision Clinic are registered blind, but the majority of these people can be helped to read using various degrees of magnification. Even if reading is not possible the patient will often have useful peripheral vision and so be able to see out of the corner of his or her eye and move around without bumping into things.

When it is suggested to visually impaired people that they could be registered blind it can be an enormous shock. It is likely that they have not thought of themselves as blind, and this suggestion may make them feel, (completely wrongly,) that losing their sight entirely is inevitable and that nothing more can be done. Those with macular degeneration are frequently told that they will not go blind with this condition as peripheral, (side,) vision will always be retained. Little wonder then, that if at a later date it is suggested they should be registered blind, they feel confused, let-down and upset.

To be certified as blind one has to be “so blind as to be unable to perform any work for which eyesight is essential.” This takes into account the central vision, affected in conditions such as macular degeneration, as well as the visual field or side vision which can be severely restricted in conditions such as Retinitis Pigmentosa and glaucoma. It is not unusual for a person who is registered blind to be able to read the newspaper without the assistance of any magnifier or Low Vision Aid. However such a person is likely to be able to see only a very small area of the paper at a time due to a markedly reduced visual field.

Partly in order to reduce this confusion there has been a change in preferred terminology. The description, “severely sight impaired” is now often used instead of

“blind” and “sight impaired” instead of “partially sighted.” People may be less reluctant to accept the description, “severely sight impaired” and so are likely to be more willing to be registered as such. It may also help if, rather than using the word “blind” in its popular sense, (“you will not go blind with this condition,”) those working with visually impaired people are careful to use more accurate terminology, (“ you will never lose your sight completely with this condition.”)

It is important that people should feel more comfortable with registration. At the moment it is likely that only around a quarter of people eligible to be certified as sight impaired or severely sight impaired are actually registered as such. Registration is certainly not the end of the road; on the contrary, it can lead to all kinds of help, advice, benefits, services and information. Only when the registers contain a much more realistic proportion of eligible people will the local authorities be able to effectively plan services for the visually impaired people within the community.