

Job that is hands-on

Nuala Naughton discovers that people with sight loss make super-sensitive physiotherapists

IT has been well-documented that people with sight loss, particularly those who are totally blind, develop a heightened sensitivity of other senses, such as hearing and touch.

This is recognised as a key factor in occupations with an emphasis on manipulation such as physiotherapy, therapeutic massage and reflexology. So much so that, until recently, the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) ran its own college of physiotherapy for blind students in London.

The RNIB also supports mainstream education centres with transcription services and advice on the unique learning needs of blind and partially sighted students.

However, many students who have studied for professional qualifications say the practicalities of access to learning and the process of "fitting in" in the mainstream route can be daunting.

These two factors were the inspiration for an innovative new programme of learning for blind and partially sighted people, devised by a specialist in pain relief and manipulative therapies.

Lanarkshire-based Paulo Quadros has worked in complementary therapy for almost 20 years and has developed a

modular learning programme in massage therapy, designed for students who are blind or partially sighted.

"When I teach massage therapy to sighted students, one of the key obstacles that my students have difficulty in overcoming at first is to suspend their use of sight and develop the sensitivity of touch, feel and instinct that is essential to manipulative therapy," he says.

"Eventually, we ended up using blindfolds to help take the emphasis away from using their eyes and to focus on their sense of touch. This is why I believe such therapies are a natural career path for blind people to pursue, and even to run their own practice. They don't have that built-in obstacle to overcome and are naturally more sensitive in their hands and fingertips than sighted people.

"I also understand that, for some non-sighted people, the prospect of re-entering education - particularly if they are older or have only recently lost their sight - can be quite an undertaking."

The course consists of three parts and each builds on the techniques and theories learned in the previous module. Quadros says that learning with other people with the same disability immediately breaks down the key barriers to



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learning and may give many blind people the confidence to go on to develop their career or for further training.

Physiotherapy is also recognised as a key area of employment for blind practitioners and was identified in the 2004 McEwan report as playing an

important role in the treatment of chronic pain. The report, commissioned by the Scottish Executive, identified some gaps in services for sufferers of chronic pain in Scotland.

A lack of therapists and training was also raised by Dr Denis Martin in his capacity as director of the Scottish Network on Chronic Pain Research at a meeting of the cross-party group on chronic pain at the Scottish Executive.

He said: "There is a shortage of therapists in healthcare but

also a need for pain management to be introduced early in the degree curriculum - not just as a specialist postgraduate subject. Physiotherapy plays an integral part in pain management."

Kenryck Lloyd Jones, policy officer for the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists in Edinburgh, confirms the leading role that blind physiotherapists play in healthcare and the need for more trained specialists.

"There is a shortage of physiotherapists in a number of key areas, including chronic pain

services, and the sector has a record of providing training support for the blind," he says. "It is a well-supported area of employment for blind and partially sighted people."

For Quadros, matching the skills of a blind therapist with a shortfall in the healthcare sector would make for a marriage built to last. "It's just a matter of introduction," he says. "If we can make it easier for more blind people to feel comfortable acquiring the skills to forge such a career, and match that up with

gaps in the services provided, the benefits are obvious.

"There are so many areas of employment which blind people have difficulty breaking into. Not everyone wants to be on benefit and many feel frustrated as they have so much to contribute to society - not only in the health sector but in social enterprises and their local community, working with charities and in the interest of social inclusion."

In complementary therapies such as reflexology, a sensitive



FOR NON-SIGHTED PEOPLE. RE-ENTERING EDUCATION CAN BE QUITE AN UNDERTAKING

touch is particularly important as the principle of reflexology associates key meridian points of the feet and hands with specific areas in the body.

Many sighted reflexologists say they close their eyes when working with clients as it helps them to "see" what they're doing without the distractions of their physical surroundings.

Quadros explains that this is a common practice among complementary therapists. "Non-sighted and sighted therapists 'see' with their hands," he says. "Blind people just feel it more, in my opinion. I'm also looking at different ways to teach anatomy and physiology to blind students as these subjects are an integral part of any good massage course.

"I also think that blind and partially sighted individuals would work well as craniosacral therapy practitioners as this involves extreme sensitivity in the hands in order to feel the spinal fluid pulse."

While a disability-specific training course may suit some students, others prefer to learn in a mainstream environment, and organisations such as Visibility (formerly The Society for the Blind) and the RNIB can help direct students to courses and colleges which are accessible to people who have specific learning needs.