

Psychological Aspects of Vestibular Disorders: A National Survey of Clinical Practice

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Background

People with vestibular disorders often experience mental health problems such as anxiety and depression as well as cognitive changes affecting, for example, memory and concentration. These problems can be distressing for people with vestibular disorders, affecting their daily activities and recovery.

Despite a growing recognition of this issue, there are no clear clinical guidelines that outline how to effectively support and treat psychological distress amongst people with vestibular disorders. This means that clinical teams might be working differently across the UK. Currently, we know little about how psychological aspects of vestibular disorders are addressed within routine clinical care. A study therefore surveyed 101 UK healthcare professionals regarding their perception of and approach to addressing psychological distress in people with vestibular disorders.

Key findings

- Almost all respondents (96%) reported that there were psychological elements to vestibular disorders.
- Respondents stressed the importance of tackling the psychological aspects of vestibular disorders in a timely way. However, respondents, particularly those with less professional experience, lacked the confidence to carry this out.
- Respondents dealt with cognitive problems less frequently than mental health problems in people with vestibular disorders.
- The most reported tools for assessing psychological distress were history taking and questionnaires including some questions about psychological distress.
- For treating psychological distress, respondents typically discussed symptoms with patients and signposted them to other relevant professionals. Referrals for psychological support tended to be made to separate services, via the patient's GP or the patient referring themselves.
- Referral difficulties and limited interdisciplinary skills and knowledge are important barriers in the treatment of psychological distress amongst people with vestibular disorders.

Further reflections

Healthcare professionals highlighted that psychological distress has a profound impact on people with vestibular disorders and that acknowledging and validating their experience was important.

They also pointed to the complexity of psychological distress and acknowledged that the skillset of the professional and the emphasis that they place on psychological aspects impacts

upon care provision. Healthcare professionals who had received psychological training, found this helpful. A need for further training and targeted resources was identified.

Finally, respondents highlighted that workload pressures and limited or complicated referral options, negatively impact a patient's journey. Facilitating patient access to professionals with specialist knowledge about the connection between vestibular disorders and psychological distress was seen as important for successful treatment.

Ways forward

This study suggests support for people with vestibular disorders could be improved by:

- Developing skills and building confidence among healthcare professionals to address psychological distress, particularly how to assess and treat these.
- Moving towards a multidisciplinary approach, meaning that professionals from different backgrounds work (more) closely together.

Contact details

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