

YOU AND YOURS

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PRESENTER: Liz Barclay

LIZ BARCLAY: The Royal National Institute for the Deaf has sparked controversy by appointing a new chief executive who doesn't have a hearing impairment. John Low is moving to the top job from his current post as the executive director for research, technology and health at the RNID. So it's an internal promotion and his supporters say he's the ideal man for the job, and knows how the society works and what its members want. But others argue that he can't campaign successfully because he doesn't fully understand the hearing problems his members experience.

John Low joins us now. Mr Low how do you answer your critics?

LOW: I am the best person for the job, according to the trustees, who went through a very elaborate process of looking for candidates on a wide basis. Over 200 people were interested in the post and in the end they selected me. I've always been interested in deafness since my PhD work in auditory feedback in Scotland and working with a broad range of people with different types of hearing loss and very different needs at RNID has been really a lot of fun and very, very interesting and I've been able to achieve a great deal here.

LIZ BARCLAY: And so what do you think that you will bring to the job that a hearing impaired person may not bring?

LOW: I don't think disability is the key issue in terms of the executive role that I will fill. The governance of the organisation comes from the trustees, a majority of those are either deaf or hard of hearing. The chairman will now, for the first time in a long time, be a deaf person and therefore the direction of the organisation, the strategy, that I will enact, will be set by people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

LIZ BARCLAY: So to what extent then do you accept the arguments that non-disabled people won't be best served - best placed to serve the interests of members of an organisation with disabilities?

LOW:

It's not true. The ability of the person to do the job is the thing that matters and the appropriate structures within the organisation, in terms of its governance and the way it's planned. My ability to do the job is not dictated by my disability or non-disability.

LIZ BARCLAY: I'm sorry to put you through what's just been like another job interview Mr Low but good luck in the job and thank you very much for joining us.

The RNID isn't the only disability organisation to recently appoint a non-disabled chief. Yesterday Scope announced that their new chief executive, Tony Manwaring, was also non-disabled. So is this sending out the wrong message to disabled people and about their right to work? Should charities be run by and employ people with relevant disabilities or not? We'll be discussing that shortly but first our disability issues reporter, Caroline Atkinson, has been speaking to staff at two charities.

ATKINSON: This is the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign headquarters in London. It supports 170,000 people with a huge range of neuromuscular diseases, some of which are fatal and others are not. The campaign's been in this building for about 15 years and I've come to meet the chief executive, Christine Cryer.

Now you don't have MD and none of the staff in this building at headquarters have MD. When you hear that other organisations are doing the same as you and not appointing somebody with the particular disability or disorder what is your reaction to that?

CRYER: I think it's got to be the right person for the job. We have an equal opportunities policy here where we look at the skill sets of the people we appoint and compare them to the person specification. We would equally employ someone with muscular dystrophy if they had the right skill sets. But at the end of the day we're talking here about running a multimillion pound organisation and we have to make sure that that money that we got from our supporters is spent wisely, therefore the skill sets are very, very important at this level.

ATKINSON: Do you think the nature of different diseases and different disabilities actually plays a role in whether a person, at the highest level of a charity, can actually take on that role?

CRYER: Well yes, I mean muscular dystrophy is not as prevalent as something like deafness, for example. Therefore we've got a smaller pot of people to actually call on. I think at the end of the day we would welcome more applicants from people with muscular dystrophy but we appreciate the fact that we do have a smaller pool to call on.

ATKINSON: And when disabled people say they really want their campaigning and their fundraising done by people who really know what it's like to have that disease, do you feel - I mean some people would say you are letting them down, do you think you're letting them down?

CRYER: I think the most important thing is, is to actually listen to what our members actually want. It's absolutely crucial. Anyone in this role would be a fool not to actually listen to the people with the condition they're actually representing. With muscular dystrophy we represent over 60 different forms of muscle disease, each of which is different. And part of my role is to listen to everyone of those 60 and make sure that we, at the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign, are actually representing all of those views and that's crucial.

ATKINSON: Now Elaine Bennett is someone actually doing the job here at the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign headquarters, you're the head of fundraising but your career has been one of working in different charities. Do you take the view that you can do your job, even if you don't have a condition that you're actually campaigning for?

BENNETT: Yes absolutely. I think the most important thing for me is that I can emotionally connect to the charity I'm working for. So before I joined this charity I went and I visited a family with muscular dystrophy and talked to them about the pressures that they live with everyday and that's important for me because I'm doing fundraising and communication and I have to be able to motivate other people and to sell that story to other people. I've never found it a difficulty that I

don't have a disability and often what I will do is if I'm going in to talk to somebody about supporting the charity I may take somebody with muscular dystrophy with me because they can add - they can add that element if that's needed.

ATKINSON: Now despite the situation here at the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign and the appointment of John Low at the RNID, the trend is increasingly towards the appointment of people with disabilities and some charities say positive discrimination is something they are pushing towards as much as is legally possible. Arthritis Care, for example, say that in some of their jobs, like those of patient experts, having arthritis is actually a requirement because you have to have it to understand the pain that people are going through. At the Spinal Injuries Association its chief executive has a spinal cord injury, all of the board members have a spinal cord injury and 50 per cent of the staff have spinal cord injuries.

I'm now at the Multiple Sclerosis Society's national centre, operating from its new purpose built block, representing the thousands of people with this progressively disabling neurological disease. This building is all hi-tech - lots of automatic doors, touch control panels instead of door handles, it's totally accessible and it even has a rest room for members wiped out by their MS fatigue.

Now with me is Sarah Philips, the chairman of the Multiple Sclerosis Society. Sarah, do you feel that running an organisation like this, it's far better if your employees, your chief executive and yourself actually understand a lot about the disease, either personally or with personal involvement?

PHILIPS: I think it's absolutely essential and that's the way we've tried to build the MS Society over the last few years. Certainly when I first went to a branch I felt, as a person with MS, I was slightly suffered there and nobody really wanted to know my opinion or anybody else's opinion with MS and that was awful and I want to make sure - you know there are 85,000 people out there with MS and they each have family members and carers, a lot of people need our support and they won't approach us if we think we're not caring, we're not understanding, we don't know what it's like to live with MS. We absolutely have to know that. And so we've tried to build our organisation, taking people with MS in all areas, people affected by MS too - carers, family members.

ATKINSON: Now one of those people is Theo Blackmoor. Theo you actually work in this building, you have MS, do you think you can actually do your job better because you have MS?

BLACKMOOR: Well I feel that having MS myself helps me bring a personal understanding of many of the issues that people with MS will be experiencing and also people affected by MS, such as family, friends and carers. I have first hand knowledge of the experience that those people went through, for example, when I was diagnosed with MS and the kind of support that they found helpful. So I find it's really helpful to me in this position absolutely.

ATKINSON: Now obviously there are some organisations which are appointing people who don't have the disability for which the particular charity is campaigning, do you think disabled people should be appointed to these jobs ahead of able bodied people?

BLACKMOOR: If the person who gets the job is better and they don't have a disability then it's correct to appoint that person over a person with a disability. However, if you have two people who are both equally qualified then the person with the disability should absolutely be the person for the job.

LIZ BARCLAY: Theo Blackmoor ending that report.

Andy Rickell is chief executive of the British Council of Disabled People, actress Julie Fernandez stars in the BBC Two programme, The Office, and she set up the Disability Foundation four years ago and James Strachan is the outgoing chief executive and the new chair of the Royal National Institute for the Deaf.

James Strachan, just to return briefly to John Low's appointment and to pick up on that point just made there, had you had two applicants of equal standing, one with a hearing impairment and one without, what decision would you have made?

STRACHAN: Well we didn't have that decision but had we had it, as was just said, without question, if you had everything identical and one person had personal experience of a disability that person would be the better person for the job.

LIZ BARCLAY: So you accept then the arguments that it's better to have, at the head of an organisation like this, and working throughout the staff members, people with the relevant disability?

STRACHAN: I accept that that is one aspect. I think where this debate is slightly going wrong is that there's too much focus on simply the chief executive. What actually is much more important, in a charity, compared to say a business, is that the board, which actually sets strategy and policy for a charity, is fully informed and preferably made up of people with that particular disability. And when I stepped down from the RNID board and became chief executive I was astonished by how little we were in touch with the almost nine million people in this country who suffer from some form of hearing loss. And the immediate change we made was to establish membership which then voted the board. The board has to be, as you heard earlier, a majority deaf and hard of hearing. But also it's that supporter base of several hundred thousand and that voting membership of 30,000 that gives us our real linkage with what deaf and hard of hearing people want and that's the most important thing.

LIZ BARCLAY: Let me put that to Andy Rickell from the British Council of Disabled People. Andy a relevant point there isn't it, the chief executive is only part of the structure of the organisation?

RICKELL: Yes but that person plays a fundamental role within the organisation, that person is a figurehead, that person often has to represent the interests of the disabled people of the organisation they're representing and they have to fully empathise with the people that they're working for and I don't think that really can be done. The point that John Low made was that he felt that he was the best candidate, well I think the system that selected him is fundamentally flawed. I entirely agree that the best candidate should be selected but I believe the best candidate has to be someone with personal experience of disability.

LIZ BARCLAY: Julie Fernandez.

FERNANDEZ: A chief executive position is the highest paid position within an organisation and therefore what better person to have than a person with a disability who is an employee - the highest paid employee. As Andy's just said, the one that is the figurehead of the organisation. Now if we were living in an environment where people with disabilities were of an equal footing to the able bodied community in the United Kingdom in the year 2002 then I fully completely understand and would like integration - that means 50 per cent able bodied people, 50 per cent disabled people - but until such time as disabled people are on an equal footing then people with disabilities should be working more within the charity sector. That sounds very patronising in some respects because unfortunately it is a charity sector that we do tend to get most of the jobs in, which is made harder

by the fact that the able bodied community step into those roles as well, it's a bit like me losing out an acting role job to an able bodied actress but in a wheelchair. And if you live with a disability you live in the United Kingdom in a very difficult environment because the NHS system, the social services system and all the other systems that are built around to help you don't necessarily work quite as well as they should do. And we should be representing ourselves. We are intelligent enough to be employed.

LIZ BARCLAY: Andy Rickell you said that the recruitment system, somewhere along the line, must be flawed. Where are those flaws?

RICHELL: I mean [inaudible word] aspects, bearing in mind the history, let's say, of the RNID, which did appoint a deaf chief executive at some point in the past and that person didn't stay long, that immediately - whatever the reason for that - gives negative reasons why someone who has a hearing impairment would think about applying in the first instance, there'd be doubts about whether they'd get a fair hearing, pardon the pun. That an issue about - you can set up the selection criteria, even if it was in equal ops you set down what the selection criteria are, you can quite unintentionally exclude people with impairments who are disabled because you might set an educational criterion which actually is quite difficult for people who have, let's say, hearing impairment or whatever, to acquire because of the discrimination that disabled people suffer in education for instance.

LIZ BARCLAY: James Strachan do you take that point - that it is possible to exclude through the recruitment process people who would have been the best person for the job?

STRACHAN: Well I think the point I'd like to pick up actually is that what was said wasn't quite right because at RNID we had a profoundly deaf chief executive who did not do the job very well and left. We then had another profoundly deaf chief executive, chosen at the time as the best person by the board, this time we have a non-deaf chief executive but someone who has worked very, very closely with deaf and hard of hearing people for much of his life and will do a tremendous job. So I just want to correct that. I think disability and disability awareness is all about getting people to realise the diversity of people in society and this debate is almost discriminatory. It is not something, in my view, that we should be saying exclusively this one particular job, which as I've said before is not necessarily the absolute key job in terms of strategic thinking, should be somebody with the disability.

LIZ BARCLAY: But isn't there a danger - yes let's just pick up on that point though about the discriminatory nature - isn't there a danger that if you have across the board policy of appointing disabled people to jobs in disability organisations you could discriminate against the non-disabled community?

FERNANDEZ: Well welcome to our life - there's 8.6 million disabled people in the UK who get discriminated on a daily basis, try living with it physically and emotionally. Now I want to go back to the point that he made just now, the gentleman, about the fact that two people with hearing impairment, severe hearing impairments, were not very good at the job as chief executive - is that because they as individuals weren't any good at the job or is it because of their severe hearing impairment? If it was because of their severe hearing impairment then surely you can't tell me that there isn't a thousand other people out there with a hearing impairment where one or two or 10 of them might not be intelligent enough to be the leading representative of the RNID.

LIZ BARCLAY: Just to take it away from the RNID Andy, if disability organisations think that there aren't people with relevant disabilities capable of doing the jobs shouldn't they have more of a developmental and enabling role?

RICKELL: Yes, I mean just to go back to one thing but then to answer that question. You wouldn't expect a man to represent women, you wouldn't expect a white person to represent the interests of black people and the very nature of the chief executive, of any particular organisation, is to represent organisations. So I think that's a fundamental issue. It is a situation where it is entirely appropriate that a disabled person is the person involved but it absolutely, in terms of developing disabled people so that they're able to do it, one could argue that the fact that the RNID's unable to appoint a deaf chief executive actually reflects badly on the RNID.

LIZ BARCLAY: Well let's - I mean not just the RNID we're pasting here but yes.

FERNANDEZ: Actually sorry I think there's a bigger picture here and we keep picking on the RNID and the bigger picture is that it's 2002, the Disability Discrimination Act will be in force by 2004. Now the Department of Employment and Education on their website last year put on there that the turnover in disability in its entirety, once the DDA has been enforced, is £40 billion. No £40 billion, with all due respect, is a huge sum of money, there are lot of companies, a lot of businesses and a lot of people within the media are not tapping into because they're embarrassed in dealing with people with disabilities - oh goodness what happens if someone has a speech impediment and I don't understand what they have to say? Now if they make their building accessible, if any company makes their building accessible or more television programmes have more disabled people on, they're going to access part of £40 billion and they're going to have more viewing figures etc. etc. Now what is it that in 2002 we're still fighting about the rights of equal opportunities of disabled people, we've done it for black people, we've done it for women, we've done it for gays, it's 2002.

LIZ BARCLAY: So what is the way forward here? The Disability Discrimination Act is coming in, bits of it have come in, bits are still to come in but what is the way forward, that's not what it's really about, it's a change of culture is it not?

RICKELL: Yes it is, it's about recognising that organisations, like the RNID etc., have a duty to ensure the development of the people so that they basically can take over those type of organisations.

FERNANDEZ: And for bigger companies that have absolutely nothing to do with disability to make themselves accessible so I can get in the building and spend my money. If you tell me you don't want my money then obviously you're not a very good businessman. So until you make yourself accessible I can't get in with my families and carers and spend my money.

LIZ BARCLAY: Well there we have to leave it, unfortunately, Julie Fernandez, Andy Rickell and James Strachan from the RNID, thank you all for joining us.