



7 Minute Learning

Diagnostic Overshadowing



Dorset HealthCare University
NHS Foundation Trust

Introduction

'Diagnostic Overshadowing' happens when a person's health issues are overlooked because of their existing diagnosis. Safeguarding Adults Reviews (SARs) are statutory reviews that have highlighted this issue. They urge professionals to be more mindful of it, ensuring that all health needs are properly assessed and addressed.

What is Diagnostic Overshadowing?

Diagnostic overshadowing means that a person's physical health issues are overlooked because of their existing diagnosis. Here's how it happens:

- **Initially**, it referred to ignoring physical needs of people with mental health issues, attributing their physical symptoms to their mental health instead of investigating them properly.
- **Later**, it included people with learning difficulties/learning disabilities, communication problems, behavioural issues, or autism. For example, a healthcare professional might not consider that pain could be causing distress and behaviour problems.
- **Now**, it also means that healthcare professionals might not accurately assess and treat new conditions in someone with an existing diagnosis. For instance, a person with autism might develop symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder, but these symptoms are dismissed as part of their autism, and they don't get the help they need.

Factors that may contribute to Diagnostic Overshadowing:

For Professionals:

- Expertise in one area might lead to overlooking other conditions.
- Limited time with patients.
- Thinking "it's not my concern."
- Working in isolation without coordinating with other services.
- Lack of resources to refer patients to the right services.
- Limited time to contact carers or advocates.

'At risk' groups needing extra attention:

- People who misuse substances or alcohol.
- Those with challenging behaviours.
- Individuals without a carer or advocate.
- People who only seek help during a crisis.
- Those with communication difficulties.
- Individuals with fluctuating mental capacity or executive dysfunction

Preventing Diagnostic Overshadowing:

- Encourage staff to pause, listen, and focus on the person in front of them, using person-centred care.
- Promote a work culture that values curiosity and kindness.
- Foster positive team environments.
- Ensure regular professional supervision and offer it if you are a manager.
- Use complex case panels or similar resources.
- Make sure IT and operational systems can record multiple diagnoses.

Further Reading

Heslop P., Blair P., Fleming P., et al. Confidential inquiry into premature deaths of people with learning disabilities (CIPOLD). Bristol: Norah Fry Research Centre, 2013

[NHS England » Clinical guide for front line staff to support the management of patients with a learning disability and autistic people – relevant to all clinical specialties](#)

[Seeing the complete picture: A systematic review of mental health consumer and health professional experiences of diagnostic overshadowing - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)