

Speech: Proud to be dyslexic

My name's Matt Hancock, I'm proud to be Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, a member of the Cabinet and of Made By Dyslexia.

And having not talked about it for almost the whole of my adult life, I'm proud to be here today at the Global Dyslexia Summit, saying to dyslexic people the world over: you can do it.

For years, dyslexia was seen as a problem. And sure, it brings its challenges.

For me, I find long words hard to spell, and dense writing hard to read. I get frustrated when people use long words when a short one will do.

But for me, for us, and for the world, let us say it loud and clear: dyslexia brings challenge – your brain works in different ways, but with the right support, dyslexia brings big benefits too.

Dyslexia isn't a disability, but a difference. It's a distinction, not a drawback.

It's like we're on Android when most others are on Microsoft Windows.

Now, when you have different operating systems, there's going to be interface issues. Some misunderstandings.

Like when I was a boy driving home with my parents and I saw a sign saying: "Swan wood for sale."

In my mind, there was a whole wood of swans for sale.

Just picture it – like us dyslexics are so good at doing.

An entire wood full of swans. For sale!

After making my parents take a long detour, we arrived back at the sign.

My parents looked at the sign, and then looked at me.

"Matt, it's not swan wood for sale. It's sawn wood for sale."

That was a long drive back home, involving a lot of mickey-taking at my expense.

But. We did get a boot full of sawn wood to see us through the winter.

Like I said, some misunderstandings. But some big benefits also.

There's 3 things I would like to talk about today:

- ending stigma

- early assessment
- how the world needs more people to think like dyslexics do

Firstly, stigma.

I recently went public as a dyslexic. And I have been overwhelmed by the sheer outpouring of support. Texts, emails, messages from fellow dyslexics and other people with their own similar stories to tell.

Other MPs I had no idea were dyslexic. One other member of the Cabinet: Brandon Lewis, also dyslexic.

It turns out dyslexic ministers are a bit like buses. You wait ages for one to turn up then 2 come along at once.

It really shouldn't have been a surprise. Not when dyslexia affects 1 in 10 people. And when the skills the world increasingly needs – creativity, lateral thinking, empathy – these skills are often more prevalent in dyslexics because we find written communication that bit harder.

Just to put that in context: the same percentage of the population are dyslexic as are left-handed.

Not the majority. But certainly part of the mainstream.

So why did it take me so long to come out as a dyslexic?

If I'm honest, it's in part because there was still a fear. A fear that the old stereotypes about dyslexics would get dredged up.

That we're lazy. That we're stupid. That we can't do the things that come so easily to other people.

Now, those stereotypes have been proven to be lazy and stupid in themselves. Because there's nothing a dyslexic can't do. In fact, there's many things that we can do better.

A dyslexic painted the Mona Lisa, the most famous painting in Western art.

A dyslexic invented the electric lightbulb, ushering in a new age for mankind.

And a dyslexic discovered the theory of relativity, setting a new definition for the word 'genius'.

Yet, Made by Dyslexia's recent research found that 9 out of 10 dyslexics said they had been made to feel angry, stupid or embarrassed because they had dyslexia.

That's true for me too.

And only 3% of the wider public believe dyslexia is a positive trait. Unbelievable.

Somehow, in 2018, there is still a stigma, a prejudice.

That dyslexics are less rather than more. Or at the very least, not equal to other people.

And it's true. There are some things that come with greater difficulty to us – like spelling.

I used to dread spelling tests at school. And if it wasn't for the simple invention of spellchecker there's a very good chance I wouldn't be standing before you today as health secretary.

It's one of the reasons I am such a firm believer in the potential of technology to help people fulfil their potential. So thank you Bill Gates for your incredible invention, and Steve Jobs for the one I use every day now too. I even used spellcheck to write this speech. I even find the word dyslexic quite hard – why couldn't they come up with a simpler name for it?!

But I think the real reason dyslexia is still seen by some as a drawback is because they still look at life through a 20th, or even 19th, century lens instead of a 21st century lens.

Where they prioritise straight-line thinking, not creativity or insight.

I can understand the importance of spelling and how we need a standardised system so we can read and write without misunderstanding each other, I just struggle to see what order the letters go on the page.

And I reject those who say that spelling isn't important.

Just because I find it hard, doesn't mean I don't value it.

For me, relearning spelling through phonics got me to a position I can just about manage on paper.

And then, like all dyslexics, I've got my workarounds.

Like requiring short briefings. And really scratchy handwriting, so it's harder to spot a spelling mistake.

It's what we specialise in: how to adapt and thrive in a non-dyslexic world.

But wouldn't it be so much easier, and better, for everyone involved, if we could change mindsets?

Change mindsets in schools and colleges? In offices and workplaces? If a young child coming into school isn't made to feel inferior to his or her classmates simply because their brain is wired differently?

Because that is where stigma starts. And the worst kind of stigma is the one that is internalised. When you actually believe that you're incapable. That you can't rather than can do something.

Schools that are using phonics are starting to address this.

Since the government introduced phonics screening checks in 2012, we have seen the number of 6-year-olds reaching the expected reading phonics standard go from 58% to 82% this year.

And I would like to pay tribute to the Department for Education for all of the work they have done, to fund specialist resources for teacher training, new advanced online modules on dyslexia so we can enhance teachers' knowledge, understanding and skills.

This is all welcome, and it is what the government's reforms were designed to do.

I believe that education, health, public health and social care commissioners should work more closely together to better deliver for children and young people with different educational needs.

I want to see every child taught according to their needs. And this brings me to the second thing I would like to talk about – early assessment.

Now, I discovered I had dyslexia pretty late on. I was already at university. I'd made it through school by specialising in maths subjects. And then when a brilliant tutor saw that my ability to talk was very different to my ability to write, he suggested I go and get myself tested.

That was the breakthrough moment. I retaught myself grammar and spelling from scratch using computer courses.

I was caught early enough. Diagnosis made adaptation so much easier. But there are still too many stories of late assessment, which makes it that much harder.

Early assessment and identification of dyslexia is essential to keeping a child's life chances and horizons open. With the right support and technology anything is possible if you're dyslexic.

I think every child who needs a dyslexia assessment should get a dyslexia assessment to ensure children with different educational needs get the support they need.

It's only by early assessment that we can ensure dyslexics fulfil their potential and that, as a society, we start to see dyslexia not as a weakness, but as a strength. A huge strength to draw on, to meet the challenge of the changing nature of work, and the technological revolution coming around the corner.

That is my third point today: why the world needs more people to think like dyslexics do.

Over a generation, automation has moved the world of work from valuing brawn to valuing brains.

Over the next generation, as the march of the machines takes over straight-line cognitive functions, what will set human beings apart from the machines

is our creativity, our intuition, our emotional and social intelligence, our ability to think laterally and imaginatively, our visualisation, our reasoning, and how we can bring a fresh perspective to an old, sometimes seemingly intractable, problem.

That's what will set us apart from the robots. And those are exactly the skills and strengths that dyslexics have in abundance.

We know that better decisions are made when people bring different perspectives. That's what underpins my profound belief in the value of diversity.

Throughout my career I've sought to promote diversity: of background, of race, of gender, of sexual orientation.

Not just because as a liberal conservative, I believe in the equality of opportunity for each and every one of us to reach their potential, and I believe in the role of society and the state to see that justice made real.

But more than that, I admire what Idris Elba calls diversity of thought.

Dyslexia is another dimension of diversity of thought: and maybe because I'm dyslexic that's why I feel so strongly about it.

So rather than trying to get dyslexics to think like everybody else, we should value the diversity of thought dyslexics bring.

Imagination, creativity, neuro-diverse dyslexic abilities are the skills of the future.

Our strengths can help build better businesses, spark innovation, and create new solutions.

We may in fact hold the answer to some of the biggest challenges in education, employment and wider society.

So we shouldn't fear dyslexia, or see it as a weakness. We should embrace it and see it as a strength.

And if anyone ever tells you dyslexia is just a disability or a drawback say: no.

It's a mark of distinction, a mark of difference, which has driven some of humanity's greatest ever achievements.

And let us each say, clear and loud: I am proud to be dyslexic.