Counting the cost of difficulty with numbers
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From Prof Brian Butterworth.

Sir, I was fascinated by William Leith’s account of his difficulty with numbers (“Hopeless with numbers”, May 8). He may be one of the 5 or 6 per cent of people who suffer from a condition now called “dyscalculia”.

Summarising the UK government’s “Foresight Report on Mental Capital and Wellbeing” in Nature, the chief scientific officer and colleagues write that “developmental dyscalculia is currently the poor relation of dyslexia, with a much lower public profile. But the consequences of dyscalculia are at least as severe as those for dyslexia”.

The neural basis of this condition is beginning to be understood. The brain area specialised for numbers – part of the parietal lobe – is now known to be structurally and functionally abnormal in dyscalculics. Dyscalculia is heritable, and it persists into adulthood in many people. These sufferers, and they do really suffer, are labelled stupid by their peers, their teachers, their parents and themselves – just like dyslexics used to be.

The author of the “New Philanthropy Capital” report who Leith cites, says that it’s okay to say people. These sufferers, and they do really suffer, are labelled stupid by their peers, their teachers, their parents and themselves – just like dyslexics used to be.

Dyslexics and their teachers are well aware that it is better to be labelled dyslexic than stupid. Being labelled dyslexic can mean, nowadays, that you get teaching appropriate to your condition. We know that dyscalculics need special help too, and without labelling they won’t get it. If we are guided by the report, I am afraid that dyscalculics will continue to suffer.

Brian Butterworth,
Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience,
University College London,
London WC1, UK

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