

Experiences of disabled people accessing health care during the COVID-19 pandemic

Background

COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on the disability community

Disabled people experience:

- Inequitable access to health care leads to health inequities and poorer health outcomes
- Compounding challenges in accessing healthcare
- Potential impacts on health outcomes

Supporters

We acknowledge the support of the wider disability community, our participants, and disability organisations

- We contacted a broad range of disability organisations, and received positive feedback and support.
- Through their newsletters and social media platforms, disability organisations helped us in reaching out to people with diverse disabilities and impairments.

Recruitment

Recruitment via researchers' contacts and assistance from disability organisations

- Excellent turn-out: 60 participants have been interviewed.
- Participants include disabled people and their parents/whānau
- Participants from 18 to 70+ years old, with a broad range of disabilities and impairments, and various interactions with the health system during the COVID-19 pandemic

Initial Findings

Preliminary data analysis has revealed several initial themes

- Reduced and compromised access to care and services
- Exacerbating factors
- Protective factors
- Short- and long-term negative impacts
- Impairment-specific impacts
- Compounding vulnerability

What's Next?

Data analysis and an engagement process to verify the findings and develop recommendations

- A series of workshops with disabled people to verify interview findings.
- Consultation with the disability community, to ensure the analysis reflects their experiences.
- Engagement with disabled people to create recommendations for required changes to improve the health and disability support system.



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Initial findings	Some of the reported issues	Disabled people's voices
Reduced and compromised access to health care and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Care and services suspension and disruption • Disadvantages of rapid shift to virtual health care 	<p>"Our local GP surgery shut down since the start of the Omicron outbreak. It has been so frustrating because the problem is that our GPs don't do appointments. You can't get appointments with the local doctors." (Interviewee 55)</p>
Exacerbating factors (What makes things worse)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID-19 restrictions and policies • The health and disability system has become overstretched • Lack of planning and preparation for the disability community 	<p>"Yeah, like, it's quite stressful, like when you're in an anxiety inducing environment, like a hospital, when you're trying to access those services. And you already have like, negative experiences with health care. And it's just exacerbated by COVID. Because COVID makes it so much harder to use services, when it really shouldn't be." (Interviewee 6)</p>
Protective factors (What helps)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge and skills to navigate the system • Family and whānau support • Individualised Funding • Good relationship with health and disability service providers 	<p>"I do have a really good understanding of how it [health and disability support system] works, and how to best work within the system for the needs of my [disabled] children." (Interviewee 59)</p>
Short and long term negative impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compromised physical and mental health and wellbeing • Decreased confidence and trust in the system 	<p>"Just the fact that I haven't been able to access things that I should have been able to access over a year ago. It's gonna really affect my disability because it's just getting worse and worse and worse." (Interviewee 26)</p>
Impairment-specific impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People who live with impaired vision or hearing and neurodiversity have been experiencing specific issues in accessing health care during the pandemic 	<p>"I went to get my vaccine and I said that I'm deaf. And I explained if you want to communicate with me, please write it down, or remove your mask. And they just ignored me. They just started talking to me through the mask, and I had no idea what they were saying. And it was so frustrating. And it really had a negative impact on my mental health." (Interviewee 43)</p>
Compounding vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An intersection of issues make the disability community more vulnerable (for instance, lower rates of employment, lower income, housing insecurity, and higher reliance on public transport) 	<p>"... being fat and also being a woman has definitely significantly influenced my experiences of health care, and how that plus being disabled, and also mentally ill ... how all of those things together can significantly influence someone's ability to want to access health care, and their ability to access health care. And obviously, people who are low socio-economic and who are disabled, because they have low incomes they are quite often the ones living in quite poor-quality housing, and therefore the ones who need more medical care because of things like mould and mildew and moisture issues and all those sorts of things." (Interviewee 6)</p>