

'PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES HAVE SPECIAL ISSUES DURING VIRUS OUTBREAK'

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Persons with Disability including Mentally Ill People - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

*People with disabilities need much more support than others in the face of a pandemic. They may not be eating properly and may experience higher stress because they are unable to understand what is happening all around them, says **G.V.S. Murthy**, Vice-President and Director, Indian Institute of Public Health, Hyderabad.*

What are the unique challenges that people with disability face?

People with disability have special issues in a situation like the spread of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). People with disability are a diverse group, experiencing different hardships in accessing information on prevention and risk of infection.

People with visual impairment and blindness depend upon touch for most of their daily activities. They need to hold the hand of an escort to move around; they cannot read the messages that the rest of the population can see; they cannot practise social distancing unless there are innovative approaches like keeping a safe distance using a white cane.

For the hearing impaired, especially those who are not literate, they cannot hear the message or read it. Since many depend on lip-reading, they are compromised when the person giving a message is wearing a mask.

None of the messages in the media is using sign language interpreters. The physically disabled cannot reach a wash basin or may not be able to wash their hands vigorously.

Children and adolescents with conditions like cerebral palsy or Down's Syndrome need to be assisted in feeding. People with mental health issues cannot comprehend the messages. At the same time, people with disabilities have a higher risk of conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, which are high-risk factors for COVID-19 mortality. Therefore, people with disabilities need much more support than the rest of the population in the face of a pandemic.

They may not be eating properly and may experience higher stress because they are unable to understand what is happening all around them, over which they have no control.

Women with disability have additional issues. They are vulnerable to exploitation and even more so during a pandemic. Many of them have children without disability and are highly stressed as to how they can care for them and family members because they are not supported to care for them.

People with communication disabilities don't know how to express their problems. Routine health needs that they have are also not provided as health centres or transportation facilities are not accessible.

What is the scale of the problem?

India is home to nearly 150 million people with some degree of disability. Nearly 25-30 million have severe disability. Most of them live as part of their families and depend on a carer. This

adds to another 25-30 million carers. Therefore, we are looking at nearly 50 million people who need special support, which is not routinely forthcoming.

How can the public and government help?

India has signed up to achieve sustainable development goals, the cornerstone of which is universal access to health and education and equity. The government and the organisations working with people with disabilities have to make efforts to convert prevention and care messages on COVID-19 into an accessible format.

Health facilities should prioritise the needs of people with disabilities over the rest of the population. Decreasing waiting time in hospitals for them will reduce contact with other asymptomatic carriers of the novel coronavirus. Their medicine needs have to be provided for. Mobile health teams can provide them services at their homes rather than having them travel to hospitals. A dedicated helpline can be set up for this so that the medical team can reach them. They need to be assured of supplies of soap, sanitisers and tissues.

The general public needs to be educated on providing support for people with disabilities. Technology-savvy professionals can help to make information available in an accessible format for people with disabilities.

Students with disabilities also need to be provided support so that they can keep up academically. Therefore, online teaching programmes should be made available to them in an accessible format. Civil society should volunteer their time to provide this sort of support. Since many of them will not be able to access professional carers during a lockdown, civil society volunteers should help. Even for supporting cooking and other self-care activities, volunteers should step in.

Inclusive society is the need of the hour. We don't want to face a situation where medical equipment is prioritised based on younger populations being cared for at the cost of the elderly and the people with disability, as happened in countries like Spain where there was a limited number of ventilators and beds, which could not cope with the avalanche of cases that needed critical care.

A country's development is measured by its social support and inclusive policies. We need to set high standards and not succumb to the 'might is right' philosophy and abandon people with disability in this crisis.

What is the current situation?

Nobody is addressing the special needs of people with disabilities and making efforts at reaching out to them. We would fail as a human race if we don't show a humane response in an equitable manner with affirmative action for people with disabilities.

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