

# Barriers to healthcare access for people with disability

Dr Ruth Walker  
Senior Lecturer  
Disability and Community Inclusion  
College of Nursing and Health Sciences  
Flinders University



Image source: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/stories.html>

# Health: A basic human right

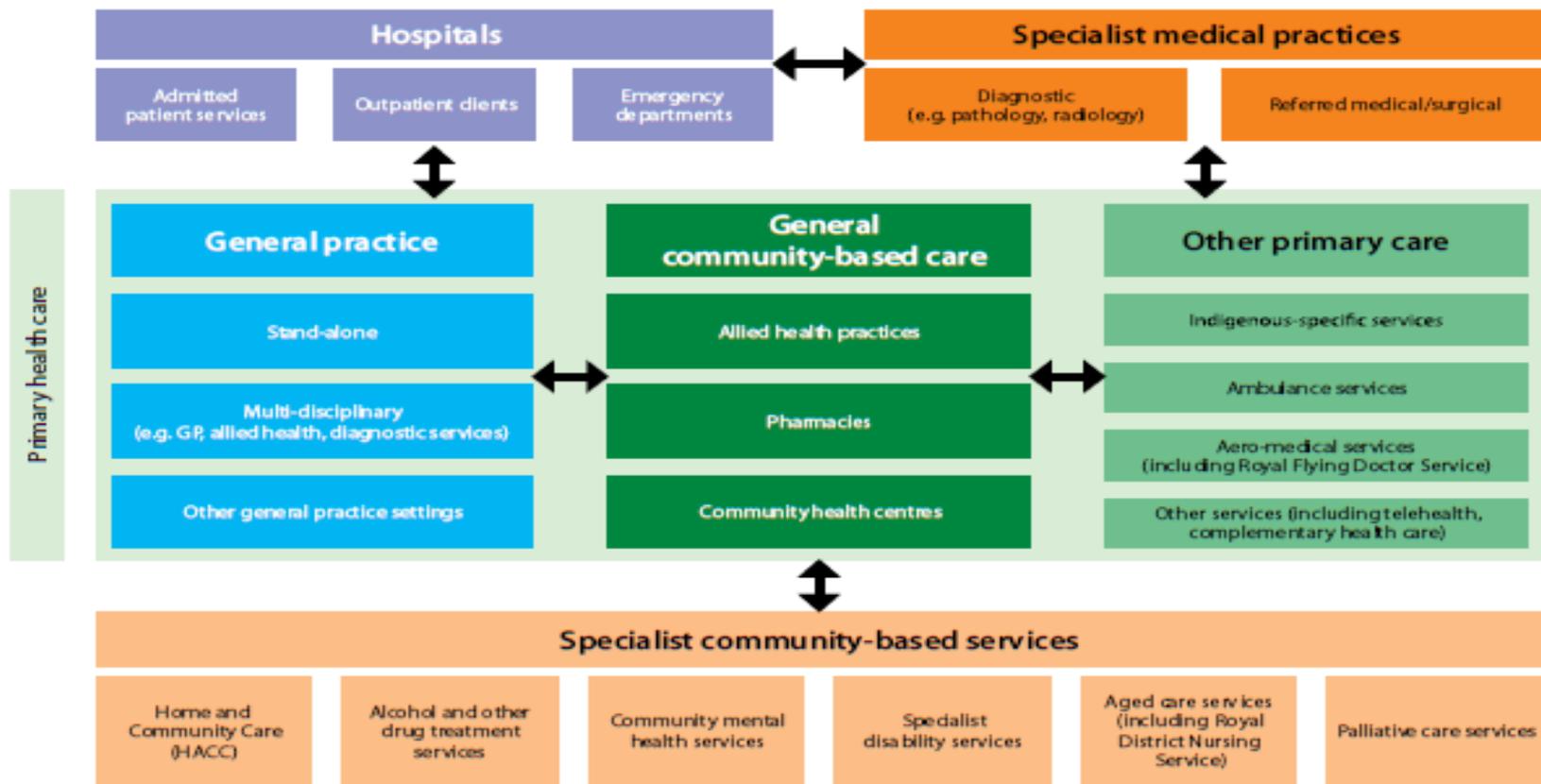
- The WHO Constitution enshrines “...the highest attainable standard of health as a fundamental right of every human being.”
- The right to health includes access to timely, acceptable, and affordable health care of appropriate quality.



# Health care sectors in Australia

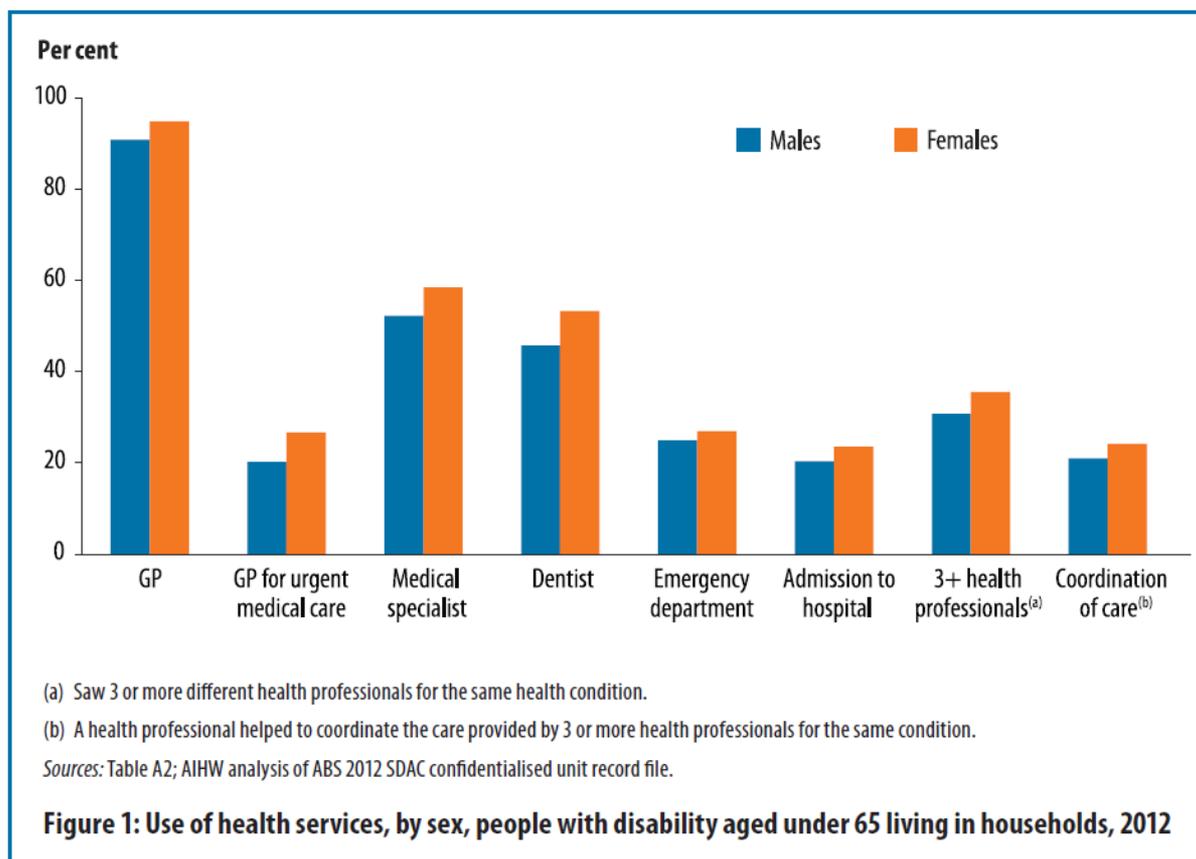
- Hospital
- Primary health care
- Disability vs mainstream
- Mental health

**Figure 8.4**



**Primary health care and its interactions with the broader health care and community service sectors**

# Use of health services



# Health of people with disability

- Secondary conditions
- Co-morbid conditions
- Age-related conditions
- Engaging in health risk behaviours
- Higher rate of premature death
- 46% of those with severe or profound disability reported fair or poor health compared with 5% of general population
- The average person with disability has 3+ long-term or chronic health conditions that may not be directly associated with their disability

# Unmet needs

- People with disability have **more** health care needs than people without disabilities and have greater **unmet need**.
- 2015 SDAC:
  - 1 in 6 people with disability aged under 65 experienced discrimination by health staff (e.g GP, nurse, hospital staff).
  - 1 in 5 delayed or did not see a GP due to cost

# Access barriers

- affordability
- **physical accessibility** and
- **acceptability** of services

...not merely adequacy of supply

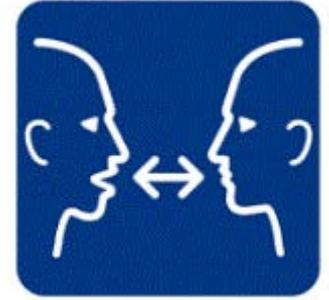
# Health care access:

- Is the health service familiar with treating people who have a similar disability or condition?
- Are they aware of the important health and disability-related issues specific to disability conditions?
- How do they keep current on issues related to specific medical and health needs?

# Physical access



- Is there parking specifically designated for people with disabilities (permits to be used)?
- Is the office physically accessible?
- Can you reach/see the receptionist?
- Can you convey personal information at the reception area in private?
- Is there a wheelchair accessible toilet available, with all the required sanitary requirements?
- If you need an adjustable examination table, do they have one? Can they assure you it will be available for your visits?



# Communication access

- Do you feel comfortable talking with the practitioner about your disability?
- Do they acknowledge your own expertise about your disability?
- Do they take adequate time with you or do you feel rushed?
- Do they encourage your bringing a support person (friend, family member)?
- Are explanations understandable?

# Affordability

- Does the practice bulk bill for those who hold a Health Care Card?
- Can you negotiate for the practice to bulk bill if on a low income?



# Acceptability

- Do you feel respected and listened to by your practitioner?
- Will your practitioner be guided to read/find out the latest information on your disability?
- Are they comfortable with a partnership approach and sharing the decision-making process with you?
- Will they give you copies of your x-rays, copies of medical reports and visit summaries for maintaining your own health records?



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwhT1KFBDV4>

(6:09mins)

# Bridging the Gap

- Drs need to understand how the body works
- Need time to listen
- Let go of assumptions
- Ask the question
- Work with the body as a whole system

# Health of people with ID

- Increased risk of early death
  - 3x more likely to die from respiratory disease
  - Higher risk of coronary heart disease
- Higher prevalence of certain medical conditions
  - Epilepsy (22% vs 1% in general population)
  - Thyroid problems
  - Dementia
  - Vision and hearing problems
  - Poor dental hygiene
- Part of a disadvantaged group
- Unhealthy lifestyles

# Access to mainstream health services

- GPs and Primary health practitioners  
(e.g. Baumbusch, Phinney & Baumbusch, 2014; Newton & McGillivray, 2017)
- Hospitalisation  
(e.g. Webber, Bowers & Davis, 2010)
- Assumptions and attitudes, lack of awareness, communication issues
- Training and skills of medical professionals

*Cathy's story*



*“Cathy went along for a hearing test because she had been experiencing a little discomfort. It should have been a routine procedure but the audiologist didn’t know that people with Down’s syndrome have short, straight ear canals. He pushed the otoscope too far into her ear and perforated her eardrum. The perforation was irreparable and she’s been wearing a hearing aid ever since”*  
(Lorraine, Cathy’s carer)

From: Treat me right! MENCAP, available from:

[https://www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/2016-08/treat\\_me\\_right.pdf](https://www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/2016-08/treat_me_right.pdf)

# Resources

- Centre for Developmental Disability Health

<http://www.cddh.monashhealth.org/index.php/resources/>



# Health literacy

## What is health literacy?

Health Literacy is:



your  
health



health & health care  
information



your health  
decisions



making decisions  
together



taking health  
action



feeling good about  
your health

# Why health literacy is important

Low health literacy affects how you:



# Health literacy

- Need to build *functional, communicative and critical* health literacy of people with disability



# References

Baumbusch, J., Phinney, A., & Baumbusch, S. (2014). Practising family medicine for adults with intellectual disabilities: patient perspectives on helpful interactions. *Canadian Family Physician, 60*(7), e356-e361.

Newton, D. C., & McGillivray, J. A. (2017). Perspectives of carers of people with intellectual disability accessing general practice. *Intellectual Disability Australasia, 38*(3), 14.

Webber, R., Bowers, B., & Bigby, C. (2010). Hospital experiences of older people with intellectual disability: Responses of group home staff and family members. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability, 35*(3), 155-164.



# Thankyou!

[ruth.walker@flinders.edu.au](mailto:ruth.walker@flinders.edu.au)

(08)8201 7936