

# Coronavirus and the health care of people with disabilities: Immediate steps

Dear Editor,

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious and contagious disease derived from a newly discovered coronavirus.<sup>[1]</sup> According to the reports from the World Health Organization (WHO), most individuals affected with the COVID-19 virus will encounter mild-to-moderate respiratory illness and recover without needing special treatment.<sup>[2]</sup>

To prevent being infected with COVID-19, people with disabilities may face various challenges to gain and apply health information provided by mass media outlets. For example, people with hearing loss need to be taught through sign language techniques properly, and individuals with vision loss may encounter problems to learn correct methods of handwashing or disinfecting their assistive devices with cautionary measures for using abrasive chemical solutions.

People with disabilities are one of the most vulnerable groups in need of attention by policy makers and researchers. Identifying the particular health needs of this population can be a vital step to prevent new cases. In addition, health systems may experience problems responding to the special needs of people with disabilities. Many of these problems are probably unknown to some health professionals who face barriers to communication with this population.<sup>[3]</sup> Thus, families can play a crucial role in sharing special health-care needs of people with disabilities. In this phase, social networks can be the cheapest, fastest, and most useful tool to share and train people with disabilities and health professionals.<sup>[4]</sup>

Although the WHO mentioned solidarity between countries and age groups as a key to defeating COVID-19, we think that solidarity between people with and without disabilities should be at the forefront. Studies show that people with disabilities are more likely to have poorer health and greater vulnerability than their counterparts without disabilities;<sup>[5,6]</sup> currently, people with disabilities need more support from individuals without disabilities who are experiencing fewer obstacles to access to health care. In addition, many nondisabled

staff may provide care without the necessary personal protective equipment such as masks and alcohol-based hand rubs for people with disabilities living in society. Health systems could provide better access to these products for their caregivers and people with disabilities often living in congregate living arrangements. We think that charities and nongovernmental organizations can have an effective performance in the equitable distribution of such products. Overall, in this paper, we would like to provide the following recommendations that address immediate steps to protect people with disabilities against COVID-19:

- Informing society of the unique struggles experienced by people with disabilities
- Applying social networks to share and train people with disabilities
- Utilizing a range of communication channels to train people with disabilities
- Improving communication skills among health professionals to convey health messages (e.g., effective handwashing, using masks, and disinfection of assistive technologies) for different groups of disabilities such as hearing loss, visual impairment, and intellectual disabilities.
- Providing practical and feasible guidance for people with different kinds of disabilities, particularly intellectual disabilities and hearing and vision loss
- Providing necessary personal protective equipment for deprived and vulnerable groups such as people with severe disabilities
- Respecting for human dignity in providing health care for people with disabilities.

In the end, we hope that governments will consider this vulnerable population and make constructive decisions with this population represented to protect people with disabilities against COVID-19. Governments through identifying lower socioeconomic groups and providing special supports can play a significant role in health promotion of people with disabilities during this challenging time.

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