

Making Women's Reproductive Healthcare Accessible to All

What do you think of when you see someone with a physical or intellectual disability? Does your mind automatically equate disability to poor health?

If so, you aren't all that different from many people. With attention growing for events like the Paralympics and Special Olympics, more people are beginning to see that being disabled doesn't preclude being healthy. That's particularly important as improvements in medical care continue to extend the life expectancy of people with physical or intellectual disabilities.

Poor access to quality health care impacts the life expectancy for individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD). As children with IDD mature into their teen and adult years, their options seem to shrink. The transition to adult services is most limited from poor access to primary care physicians who understand their needs. It's a gap that's even more concerning when considering the health care needs of the estimated 35 million American women with IDD.

The issues leading to limited access for women with IDD are complex and the solutions will require advocacy and action by everyone involved, including the women who will benefit most from change.

All women need to learn about their bodies, how relationships work, about sex, and how to keep themselves safe from disease. While access to quality health care is a universal concern, women with IDD often face more significant barriers.

The most obvious are the physical barriers. These include reliable access to transportation to health care offices, offices that are not accessible for individuals using technology such as a wheelchair, and lack of equipment for basic collection of health data such as getting a weight.

Less obvious are concerns that could limit or interfere during an interaction with the health care provider. For example, an individual with visual or cognitive impairments may not be able to take advantage of preprinted health education materials. A bright room or cold equipment can be overwhelming for people with a history of sensory challenges.

Some providers may assume there is no need to discuss sexual activity, the risk of sexually transmitted infections or preparing for a safe pregnancy. The truth is that having a physical or intellectual disability doesn't change a person's sexuality or desire to express that sexuality. Overlooking this fact could have negative consequences, particularly for women with IDD.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), women with a disability are more likely to experience intimate partner violence, including sexual and physical violence and, at the same time, have limited ability to discuss that. CDC research also points out that women with disabilities are less likely to receive preventive health screenings including screenings for breast and cervical cancer. Only 15 percent of women with IDD get routine Pap tests and only 61 percent of women with a disability had a mammogram in past two years as compared to 75 percent of those without a disability.

Medical schools and the organizations that offer continuing medical education need to include caring for people with disabilities in the curriculum. Introduction to diverse populations including people with IDD leads to improved access for all. Physician partnerships with community based and advocacy organizations open the possibilities of reducing structural barriers and provide innovative resources that result in more meaningful and effective patient encounters.

The [Rowan-Virtua Regional Integrated Special Needs \(RISN\) Center](#) provides South Jersey with its first primary care facility focused on providing care for people with intellectual, developmental, and physical disabilities. RISN Center creates the foundation, bridge and path for patients and caregivers to help them thrive into adulthood. RISN Center is part of the Rowan-Virtua School of Osteopathic Medicine providing students and residents with educational and experiential opportunities in working with individuals with disabilities.

RISN Center has prepared a resource titled, [Women's Health and What Every Woman Should Know](#). This publication provides information that will be helpful to women with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), including how to advocate for yourself in your health care visit, reproductive health exams and sexuality resources.

RISN Center will be hosting "Pap Camp", an interactive experience in which individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD) will learn more about the reproductive health visit and how to advocate for their individual needs during any encounter.

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