

Beyond Inclusion: The Need for Health Equity for Women with Disabilities

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Abstract : The United States Centers for Disease Control tells us that many women with disabilities will not receive regular health screenings, including Pap Smears and mammograms. This article was comprised and written to recognize the barriers to care, gaps in existing healthcare implementation, and viable methodologies for the provision of comprehensive and robust gynecologic care for women with disabilities. According to the World Health Organization, 15% of the world's population, or approximately 1 billion people, have disabilities, most of whom are identified as women. Women with disabilities are described as being multi-disabled, as in some places, they suffer exclusion because of their disabilities as well as their gender. The paucity of information regarding how to create a healthcare system that is inclusive of every woman, regardless of her type of disability (physical, mental, intellectual or medical), has made it challenging to establish an environment that makes it possible for individuals to access care in an equitable, respectful and comprehensive way. A review of the current literature, institutional websites within the United States and American resource guides was implemented to determine where comprehensive models of care for women with disabilities exist, as well as the modalities that are being employed to meet their healthcare needs. The many barriers to care that women with disabilities face were also extracted from various sources within the literature to provide an exhaustive list that can be tackled, one by one. Of the 637 Hospital Systems in the United States, only 7 provide website documentation of health care services that address the unique needs of women with disabilities. The presumption is that if institutions have not marketed such interventions to the community, then it is likely that they do not have a robust suite of services with which to make gynecologic care available to patients with disabilities. Through this review, 7 main barriers to comprehensive gynecologic care were identified, with more than 20 sub-categories existing within those. As with many other areas of community life, inclusion remains lacking in the delivery of healthcare for women with disabilities. There are at least 7 barriers that must be overcome in order to provide equity in the medical office, the exam room, the hospital and the operating room. While few institutions have prioritized this, those few have provided blueprints that can easily be adopted by others. However, as the general population lives longer and ages, the incidence of disabilities increases, as do the healthcare disparities surrounding them. Further compounded by this is a lack of formal education for medical providers in the United States.

Keywords : health equity, inclusion, healthcare disparities, education

Conference Title : ICDD 2024 : International Conference on Disability and Diversity

Conference Location : Lisbon, Portugal

Conference Dates : April 11-12, 2024