



Letter to Editor

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Facilitating access of disabled persons to avail reproductive health by overcoming social barriers

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Dear Editor,

Reproductive healthcare and autonomy are integral to overall health, well-being, and human fundamental rights[1]. However, for individuals with disabilities, access to reproductive healthcare and their autonomy is significantly jeopardized due to a combination of parameters[1].

Disabled people have to deal with a wide range of social barriers while they decide to access healthcare facilities for reproductive health[2,3]. Regarding social barriers, members of the community often have a biased opinion towards disabled people like they are asexual or uninterested in relationships and so they have no reproductive health needs, or as they are inherently dependent, they are not fit to become parents[2]. Personally, many disabled people fear that they will be judged or will have to undergo legal scrutiny if they engage in sexual activity or approach health facilities for reproductive healthcare[3].

Owing to the presence of the above-mentioned social barriers, disabled individuals have reduced access to preventive care, limited options for family planning, and delay in receiving timely care[1,2]. It is not an uncommon occurrence that the reproductive choices of disabled people are either influenced or made by others, which significantly limits their control over personal healthcare decisions, including forced sterilization or contraception[4]. In addition, this societal stigma becomes the major cause of social stigma and mental health concerns (*viz.* anxiety, depression, helplessness, *etc.*), which jeopardizes their dignity and overall wellbeing[5].

These consequences justify the urgent need to deliver accessible and equitable reproductive healthcare services that respect the autonomy and rights of disabled people[1,2,6–8]. The primary intervention is to increase community awareness about the reproductive health needs, the misconceptions in society, and that we must give disabled individuals autonomy to make informed decisions[6]. The success of these awareness activities can be enhanced by the involvement of

community leaders and celebrities[6]. In addition, family members should be guided that disabled people should not be judged or discriminated for their reproductive choices, but rather supported[7]. As healthcare providers occupy the centre stage, there is a definite need to sensitize healthcare professionals about the reproductive needs of disabled individuals, and the need to be inclusive by being respectful and unbiased[1,2].

It is quite important from the legal perspective that laws that safeguard the autonomy of disabled individuals are in place, and the practice of obtaining informed consent after explaining all possible options must be implemented in all healthcare establishments[3]. To reduce the financial burden on disabled individuals, the government must introduce subsidies and encourage insurance companies to provide coverage specifically for the reproductive health needs of disabled persons[8]. There is a definite need to create a support network which gives a platform for these people to share their experiences and learn from each other and advocate for their rights[2,7,8].

In conclusion, disabled people have to deal with multiple social barriers that interfere with their rights to avail reproductive health. There arises the indispensable need to implement targeted interventions to ensure equitable and respectful access to reproductive healthcare services and facilities in a dignified manner.

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Authors' contributions

Saurabh R. Shrivastava contributed to the conception or design and drafting of the work, approval of the final version of the manuscript, and agreed for all aspects of the work. Prateek S. Bobhate contributed to the literature review, revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content, approval of the final version of the manuscript, and agreed for all aspects of the work. Nancy Nair contributed to the literature review, revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content, approval of the final version of the manuscript, and agreed for all aspects of the work.

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