

# How to promote good health & optimise the healthcare of people with an intellectual disability



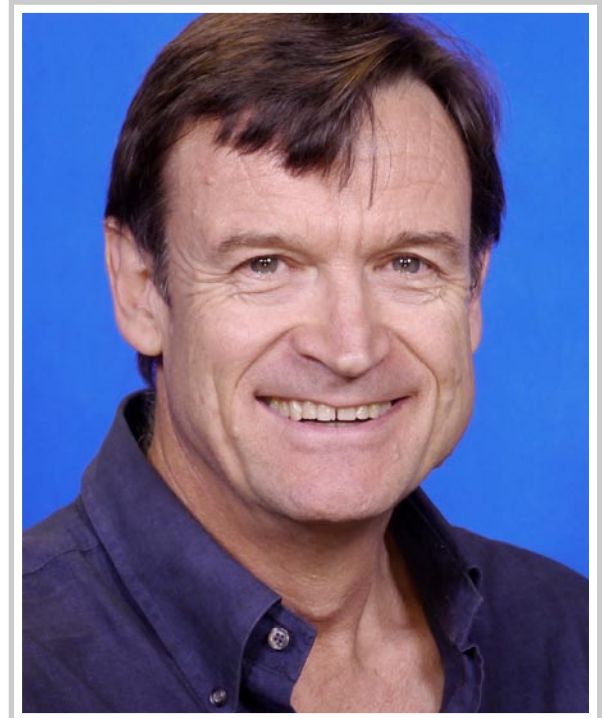
- Ideas,  
Tips,  
and  
Strategies

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**Prof Nick Lennox**

On July 4th, Dr Jane Tracy and I presented and drew on the expertise in the room to address how to promote good health and optimise the health of people with intellectual disability. Below I have tried to distil some of the day's presentations.

There is considerable evidence of suboptimal health and health care of people with intellectual disability in Australia both now and as long as such issues have been investigated (Beange, McElduff & Baker, 1995; Florio & Trollor 2015; Lennox et al., 2010). The barriers to good health care are many but include negative attitudes and devaluing, impediments to access healthy lifestyles and health care and the challenges of communication. The struggle to improve attitudes and value people with intellectual disability is a constant battle which goes to the core of why we as a society discriminate against people with disability. It is a battle which is ongoing. Likewise communication is fundamental to our being and especially as social animals, to our ability to live a good life including a good healthy life. To improve the health and health care of people with intellectual disability it is critical these three barriers are addressed.

I will now address specific strategies which may help if you are a person with intellectual disability or supporting someone.

- 1) **Maximise the person's value at every turn;** be it at home, the community or accessing healthcare. We need to be patient, persistent and respectful. Modelling such interactions may challenge negative behaviours by others toward the person you support. Access to mainstream healthy lifestyle activities and healthcare professionals may require negotiating some negative attitudes. Remember - Be patient, persistent and respectful.
- 2) **Optimal communication is crucial to the provision of healthcare.** As medical practitioners we are severely limited in our ability to provide high quality healthcare if we cannot understand what the person is feeling in their body and mind. I cannot emphasise this enough. Can you do the following?
  - a. Do everything you can to clarify what you as a person with a disability is experiencing or what the person

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# ... healthcare ...

## - Ideas, Tips, and Strategies



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you support is experiencing. For example: What does the pain feel like? When did it start? How long does it last? What makes it worse? What makes it better? Have you had it before?

- b. What other major illness have you had? Write the answers to these question down or chart them. This is true of pain and psychological distress as well as other functions such as bowel habits, behaviours of concern or mood.
  - c. Get clarity and summarise the information and present it to your healthcare professionals. This information is critical to finding the underlying cause and directing what the health practitioner should do next. This may be gathering more information about what is happening for the person or doing investigations or an immediate intervention. At times waiting and following the changes in the person's wellbeing can act to clarify the diagnosis and what should be done. At other times action in the form of treatment/s or investigation is needed. This is the skill the health practitioner brings to the situation and should be respected but also understood and at times questioned.
  - d. Ask questions, for example you may ask, what else can we do as support person or as the person themselves, what further information do you need? If the practitioner recommends a treatment; how long do we wait to see if it works and if it does not, what next, or if they get worse what do we do?
- 3) There is considerable evidence that a **yearly health assessment will improve health care** provision and should be undertaken. Often health conditions do not reveal themselves early in their development or health promotion activities are not received by the person. The evidence suggests a health

check or health assessment can reveal unrecognised or poorly managed conditions. As support people you need to facilitate this process by gathering information and facilitating the process. One strategy is to access the nurse practitioner or practice nurse, who are often able to perform most of the assessment and decrease the time and administrative burden on the general practitioner. Negotiate a time for the assessment when the practice is not so busy and able to spend time with the person and send a support person who knows the person with a disability, their life and health story.

In short be vigilant to promote the value of the person with an intellectual disability, advocate respectfully, but firmly and maximise effective communication. Any communication must be in an accessible form – concise and accurate to the practitioner which will diminish some of the barriers to healthcare. Help the practitioner deliver information in a format that is understandable by the person with an intellectual disability, this will maximise the potential for a good outcome and good health and healthcare.

## References

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