



Communication Disabilities Access Canada

April 27, 2020

The Hon. Carla Qualtrough
Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Dear Minister Qualtrough,

Despite existing national and provincial legislation that obligates hospitals to provide accommodations to support patients communicating when accessing healthcare services, Ariis Knight tragically passed away in hospital with no communication supports in place to facilitate her communication with healthcare providers and to comfort her through her final hours. Ariis' desperate and lonely experience and the anguish of her family will regrettably recur across Canadian hospitals unless the communication needs of patients who have Covid-19 are addressed. This is unacceptable and violates national and international human rights legislation.

Communication Disabilities Access Canada (CDAC) is asking you and the Covid Disability Advisory Group (CDAG) to immediately address the communication support needs of patients who have speech, language and/or cognitive disabilities due to cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder, developmental or intellectual disability, acquired brain injury, aphasia after a stroke, ALS, multiple sclerosis, dementia and other conditions.

Specifically, we ask for the implementation of reasonable, safe, communication accommodations throughout all stages of Covid-19 assessment and treatment. This will involve requiring hospitals and healthcare providers to develop procedures and practices in the following areas:

- A formal, documented process on admission to identify how the patient communicates, the communication accommodations they require, the support person(s) they designate to assist with communication as well as their decision-making arrangement relative to provincial and territorial legislation (e.g. independent, supported, assisted by trusted people, power of attorney, guardian). There are a [number of existing protocols and resources](#) that can be put in place for this purpose.

- Arrangements for support person(s) to assist with communication to the greatest extent possible during all phases of assessment and treatment. This would involve:
 - Exemption to the “no visitor” protocol for patients who require communication support.
 - Recognition that a communication support person is an essential support service, not a visitor.
 - A process whereby the patient authorizes the person(s) they want to assist with communication (family member, attendant, direct support professional, caregiver) and approves the level of medical information that can be shared with a support person.
 - Engagement of the support person to address the two-way communication needs of the patient. This may involve one or more areas of assisting the patient in understanding what a healthcare provider is saying; supporting the healthcare provider in understanding what the patient is communicating; providing accessible communication methods of communication which may need to be adjusted due to the patient’s illness and the context; ensuring that the patient has provided informed consent to treatment or lack of treatment; advocating that the patient’s views have been accurately heard, acknowledged and honored.
 - Ensuring that support persons conform to infection control practices and have access to appropriate PPEs.
- Provision of [information, resources and direct support for healthcare providers](#) when communicating with patients who have communication needs. This involves giving them strategies and communication aids for two-way communication with patients who have Covid-19.
- Engagement of a Speech-Language Pathologist when patients require a way to communicate or who have no support person to assist with communication. This involves access to a [range of context specific communication boards](#).
- [Information for people who have existing communication disabilities](#) to help them prepare for communicating in a healthcare setting about Covid-19. This involves preparing a [communication toolkit](#).

At this time, Communication Disabilities Access Canada has compiled a list of resources that can be used to address some of these communication needs at <https://www.cdacanada.com/resources/covid-19/about/>. Unfortunately, we are doing this on a volunteer basis and we do not have the internal resources to widely disseminate this information to hospitals, healthcare workers, and the disability sector.

We hope that you and the CDAG can mobilize action as soon as possible, thereby reducing the possibility of, or preventing the inexcusable circumstances that Ariis Knight endured – which was an unacceptable violation of her human rights.

Yours sincerely,



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