

The Impact of COVID-19 on People with Learning Disabilities

Scottish

Learning Disabilities

Observatory

Summary

In 2020, the Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory began a study to investigate the rates of infection, case fatality and excess deaths due to COVID-19 for people with learning disabilities in the first wave of the pandemic in Scotland.

The aim of this study was to understand and provide evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on people with learning disabilities in Scotland. This information was urgently required to inform clinical decision-making and public health policy in Scotland and the UK. The findings from this study contributed to the Scottish Government's decision to include all people with learning disabilities in the Priority 6 vaccination group in February 2021.

What was the problem?

People with learning disabilities experience high levels of health inequality. Studies have found that people with learning disabilities die 20 years earlier than the general population, often from preventable or treatable conditions. Leading causes of death in children and young people as well as adults with learning disabilities are respiratory illnesses such as pneumonia or the flu.

Throughout 2020, there was a major gap in the data available in Scotland on the impact of COVID-19 on people with learning disabilities. Given our knowledge of existing health inequalities and increased risk of death from respiratory conditions, it was critically important that this gap be addressed.

What did we do?

We linked information from Scotland's Census 2011 with death registrations, hospital admissions records and COVID-19 testing data to investigate COVID-19 infection, hospitalisation and death rates.



We found that, overall, people in the learning disabilities population were over three times more likely to die from COVID-19 than people in the general population.

We also found that, when compared to the general population, people with learning disabilities were twice as likely to become infected with COVID-19 and they were also twice as likely to experience a severe outcome of COVID-19 infection, resulting in hospitalisation and/or death.

We published the preliminary findings on the Observatory website to enable the Scottish Government to use the evidence to support urgent decision making around vaccine rollout and to respond to calls for the inclusion of all people with learning disabilities as a priority for vaccination.

The findings were also shared with our stakeholders via social media, traditional media and through direct engagement with key partners.

What happened next?

04 FEB 2021

SLDO published the preliminary findings in order to support urgent policy decision making in relation to vaccination priority groups.

17 FEB 2021

A letter was published by the co-conveners of the Scottish Parliamentary Cross Party Group on Learning Disabilities to the Cabinet Secretary for Health & Sport re COVID-19 citing the SLDO findings. The letter called on the Scottish Government to issue guidance supporting all people in Scotland with a learning disability to come forward for vaccination under priority group 6. This letter also called for improvements in public health data to improve the ability to produce vital health intelligence on outcomes for people with learning disabilities.

09 FEB 2021

The Minister for Mental health was asked what the Scottish Government's response was to figures published by the Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory, which state that people with a learning disability are three times more likely to experience serious disease.

Angela Henderson, SLDO Director of Policy and Impact and lead researcher on the study spoke to STV News at Six about the findings.

22 FEB 2021

The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon announces that all people with a learning disability in Scotland were to be given priority group 6 status and that they were to be supported to access the vaccination programme.

Keith Lynch, Chairperson of People First (Scotland):
“Due to this research, people with learning disabilities are now included in group 6 of the vaccination. However, if the risk had been acknowledged earlier, all people with learning disabilities could have been included in group 4.”

The problem is not just that we face a lot more health issues than most people without a learning disability – many of our health conditions are preventable. We strongly believe that one of the reasons for high mortality and excess deaths is that we are not able to access the right medical care and information at the right time

We must use the findings of this research as motivation to do better and protect the health of people with learning disabilities.”

What we will do next

Our aim is for this growing body of evidence to continue to inform policy and practice in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce deaths and improve health outcomes for people with learning disabilities.

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