

Higher number of coronavirus deaths in people with learning disabilities highlights need for immediate action

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Learning disability and palliative care expert at Kingston University, London
Professor Irene Tuffrey-Wijne. Credit: Kingston University

A newly published [Public Health England report](#) which shows people with learning disabilities are 6.3 times more likely to die from coronavirus than the rest of the population shows urgent action is required, according to a learning disability and palliative care expert from London's Kingston University and St George's, University of London.

The report also revealed that [young adults](#) with learning [disabilities](#), aged 18-34, are 30 times more likely to die of COVID-19 than those without. Professor Irene Tuffrey-Wijne said these worrying figures highlighted just how [vulnerable people](#) with learning disabilities are during a pandemic.

"At the start of the pandemic, families and [learning disability](#) services tried to draw attention to the fact people with learning disabilities were going to be so much more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic. Devastatingly, this has been made even worse by the lack of support given to them," Professor Tuffrey-Wijne said.

Professor Tuffrey-Wijne, the world's first professor of palliative care for people with learning disabilities, believes more assistance was needed to help people with learning disabilities cope with and understand lockdown restrictions, and that they should have had access to regular testing.

Shortages in the availability of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for healthcare staff at the start of COVID-19 was also among the causes of the death rate, Professor Tuffrey-Wijne said. "It highlights serial failures in United Kingdom's healthcare system. We've seen problems around testing and PPE at the beginning of the pandemic where the response was slow and these weren't addressed quickly enough," she said.

The review was commissioned by the UK's Department of Health and

Social Care to look at deaths from COVID-19 of people with learning disabilities and the factors impacting the risk of death. Since its release, the expert has named three urgent steps that need to take place to drive down the mortality rate of those with learning disabilities.

Professor Tuffrey-Wijne is calling on the UK government to prioritise people with learning disabilities when rolling out a COVID-19 vaccine and has urged immediate action on two other points. "There needs to be regular testing for those with learning disabilities, even if they are asymptomatic, and the staff that look after them and their families," she said. "There also needs to be sufficient funding, support and resources for staff, families and learning disability services so that one of the most [vulnerable groups](#) in society can be looked after during what is a difficult and worrying time," she added.

Professor Tuffrey-Wijne questioned why the report was being released now, when some of the figures had been available earlier in the year, but said she hoped its publication would accelerate the process of supporting so many people. "There are more than 1.5 million people in the UK with learning disabilities, so this review has to be looked at and actions have to come out of it—it would be absolutely devastating if this got ignored and shelved," she said.

Provided by Kingston University, London

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