

Sexual and Reproductive health care experiences of Australian women with intellectual disabilities

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Background:

While women with intellectual disabilities experience significant inequities in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes, there is a dearth of research describing their SRH care experiences in the Australian context. This study aimed to build an improved understanding of the reproductive health care and pregnancy decision making experiences of Australian women with intellectual disabilities, and to elucidate key elements of best-practice SRH care, as defined by women with disabilities themselves.

Methods:

An exploratory qualitative study was undertaken. Focus groups and individual interviews with 10 women with intellectual disabilities were conducted using trauma informed and inclusive research practices. The study received ethical approval from the Griffith University HREC.

Results:

Participants described a range of SRH care experiences, some of which were empowering and enabled informed SRH and pregnancy decision making, and others that failed to adequately account for the humanity and capabilities of participants, thus undermining their capacity to control their own healthcare, pregnancy and parenting decisions. A suite of themes were identified pertaining to characteristics of best practice, barriers to health care and autonomy, pregnancy experiences, health literacy, and opportunities for intervention.

Conclusion:

Limited access to health information and low levels of literacy, misinformation, common experiences of violence and reproductive coercion and abuse, and reliance on partners and family members undermine women with intellectual disabilities' reproductive autonomy and rights. Research is needed to build a more nuanced understanding of the way individuals, services, and systems can address barriers to accessible, inclusive, quality reproductive health care, including opportunities to parent, for this population.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

Children by Choice received a grant from 100 Women to support the development of this study.