

# Guidelines to Assist Physicians When Treating Patients with Disabilities

Granite State Independent Living (GSIL) is a statewide advocacy and provider organization serving and supporting persons with disabilities in New Hampshire. One aspect of GSIL that makes us unique is that over 50% of its board and staff are made up of individuals with disabilities. Having that perspective places GSIL in a position to speak with authenticity on issues that impact persons with disabilities. We offer the following as helpful suggestions when treating persons with disabilities to promote good health, wellness and a productive doctor patient relationship.

## Attitude

Much can be forgiven when interacting with the healthcare system, but a poor attitude or disrespect by the treating physician or their charge will create a dynamic that can lead to unwillingness on the part of the patient to follow through and not communicate symptoms.

- Use people first language. People first language recognizes the person as a human being and not as a disability. (See page two)
- Don't treat an adult with a disability like a child.
- Be respectful when addressing the patient with a disability. Remember, they know their disability and their body best.
- Listen and be open to hearing from the patient as to what will work for them during an exam.
- Talk to the patient directly and not to spouse or assistant.
- Be holistic about persons with disabilities; be sure to include sexuality.

## Wheelchair users

- If the patient uses a wheelchair get down to their level and make eye contact.
- A doctor cannot give a thorough personal exam to a person while still in a wheel chair
- Make sure there is an adjustable exam table
- Listen to patients needs about positioning, support (pillows, cushions) and safety.
- Some patients may need someone to stay with them when on an exam table as they do not have the ability to balance.

## The Wheelchair itself

- Remember, for individuals who rely on a wheelchair for mobility, access to the device is critical. Always inform the patient where the wheelchair is and keep it in visual contact if possible.

## Testing

- Patients who use wheel chairs feel vulnerable when having a CT or MRI scan. Since they do not have use of legs, they may feel claustrophobic or trapped.
- Patients with spinal cord injuries may have muscle spasms and cannot lie motionless. A few notes in referral to technician or doctor may help with this.

## Patients who are Blind

- If a patient is blind there is no reason to raise your voice. Ask if they need assistance, do not assume, but do ask.
- For individuals who are blind the cane is an extension of their arm and offers the means to navigate independently. Do not remove cane without patient permission and inform them where it is. Be descriptive. (Do not say over there)

## Service Dogs

- Service dogs are permitted in doctor's offices and hospitals.

## Patients who are deaf

- Arrange for a qualified interpreter.
- Make eye contact with patient (not interpreter)

## Referrals

- When making a referral for a test or to specialists, include notes indicating a wheelchair user or other information that will clue the recipient of the referral in of the special needs of the individual.

## Appointments

- Because many persons with disabilities lack or have difficulty coordinating transportation using some logic of scheduling more than one event consecutively would be very helpful and promote wellness since they would be less likely to not show up for the event

### **To learn more, contact us:**

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