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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability (UNCRPD) was ratified in 2006. Article 21 of the Convention recognizes that people with a disability need to have access to the information they need in a form they can understand and meaningfully use – and in the same timeframe as the rest of the community.

This essay outlines how Australian authorities fared in meeting these obligations when providing COVID-19 information, and how a small organization has filled some of the gaps.

The scale of the problem

When a country that is a signatory to UNCRPD only provides written information in complex (or even plain) language, it is not meeting its

COVID-19 information for people with lower literacy

obligation under Article 21. And the percentage of the population that faces literacy challenges is larger than many realize.

In Australia, for example, 44% of the adult population (16-65 years) do not have the literacy skills to manage a range of day-to-day reading tasks. In 2013, this was 7.3 million Australian adults – a figure that did not include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, nor people in institutions. The Australian figures are similar to those of other countries:

- Norway (43%)
- Sweden (42%)
- Canada (49%)
- United Kingdom (50%)

In some countries, the percentage is even higher:

- Germany (52%)
- United States (52%)
- Spain (67%)
- Italy (70%).

To meet the needs of these populations, even plain language is not enough. Information needs to be available in easy-to-read versions such as Easy English.

Meeting the demand in Australia

When COVID-19 emerged in March 2020, the first changes implemented were at a national level. The website of the Australian Health Department published some press releases and fact sheets. Initially there was nothing for those with lower literacy.

Because of the risk this posed, Access Easy English decided to create its own Easy English information about COVID-19. We have needed to keep doing this because:

1. Government content is still only available in forms that are too complex for many people.
2. There is a significant delay in making information available on government websites.
3. The government is not publishing information on some topics.
4. There is no information on the changes to rules in different states.
5. The increased traffic to our website shows we are meeting an ongoing need.
6. Disability advocacy groups report that people are asking for Easy English content.

By August 2020, we had produced 117 COVID-19 documents in Easy English. This included:

- 35 fact sheets and posters based on content from the Australian government
- 4 posters and 3 fact sheets based on WHO information
- 82 fact sheets and posters covering state-government content ranging from rule changes and hotspots to border closures and major sport.

To put these numbers in context, our eventual 124 documents compares to just 25 documents that the Australian Government and state governments combined published for people with lower literacy.

The wide reach of our resources

Since we created them, our resources have been shared widely on many state, national, and international websites. This also shows that Easy English is relevant to far more communities than many people believe. Those sharing our resources include:

- Australian Federation of Disability Organisations
- Australian Study of Intellectual Disability (Intellectual Disability Australia. Volume 41, Issue 2, June 2020)
- Community Connective
- Ethnic Council of Victoria Health Translations
- Speech Pathology Australia (more than 22,000 hits to the page with Easy English content)
- Humans Like Us (Migrant and refugee communities)
- Ideas. A disability information and resource hub (10,472 hits between March and August)
- Tasmania Council of Social Security (TasCOSS)
- Universal Design Australia

International organisations have also made them available, including:

- International Association on the Scientific Study of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IASSIDD)

- International Society of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC)
- Royal College of Speech Language Pathologist

The need for further resources

Despite the wide distribution of these documents, much COVID-19 information is still not available in accessible formats. Topics that need to be covered as a priority include:

- financial grants from national and state governments
- extensions to government financial support
- local council services
- rebates and rules for tenants
- obligations for banks regarding home loans
- where to find local testing places
- fines for breaking the emergency rules.

Another problem is that none of the resources are available in print. It is too often assumed that everyone has access to a computer and the internet, and has the digital literacy skills to find information on websites. Yet we know that literacy and digital literacy present enormous barriers for access to information.

Meeting international obligations

The pandemic has highlighted that governments in Australia need a well-established process to create content that is evidence-based and best practice Easy English. Only then will Australia meet its obligations under Article 21 of the UNCRPD.

Of course, Australia is not alone in breaching these obligations. There remains significant work to be done internationally to make COVID-19 content accessible for those that need it.

Cathy Basterfield is an experienced speech pathologist with 32 years working with people with complex communication needs. For almost 20 years, she has been building awareness and developing Easy English. Cathy was involved in developing the first guidelines for writing Easy English in Australia. She has published in a number of journals on Easy English and regularly presents at the PLAIN conferences.

Based in Melbourne, Cathy owns and operates Access Easy English. She works across all states in Australia helping government and non-government agencies and businesses with Easy English.