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## Major Formal Investigation to test inequalities in health care for disabled people

Disabled people's access to GPs, essential health screening services and healthier lifestyle initiatives is to come under the scrutiny of the Disability Rights Commission's (DRC's) powers of Formal Investigation, it was announced today (1).

The DRC's investigation, which will run for 18 months, will gather evidence on whether primary health services are addressing the significant health inequalities experienced by people with learning disabilities and people with mental health problems; it will also make recommendations to Government on the most effective means of closing the gap in health outcomes. Particular areas of interest are GP services, essential screening and health improvement.

This investigation has been prompted by a body of evidence, launched today, that people with learning disabilities and people with mental health problems are amongst the poorest groups in society, die younger of preventable diseases than the rest of the population and miss out on life-saving screening programmes.

Research finds that:

- preventable deaths for people with learning disabilities are 4 times higher than for the rest of the population;
- people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia live on average 9 years less than other people;
- fewer than 20% of women with a learning disability attend cervical screening compared with 81% of women overall;
- people with a learning disability are 58 times more likely to die before the age of 50 than the general population, according to one study in England;
- Diabetes, which can lead to serious health problems and early death, has been estimated to be four to five times more common among people with a severe mental health problem.

Evidence detailing the root causes of unequal health outcomes is complex but when research shows that many deaths of disabled people are preventable, the DRC believes it is correct to inquire whether at a systems level we are failing to take the positive action needed to close this stark health gap.

Some of the potentially significant issues the Formal Investigation will examine are:

- individuals or staff not recognising a health problem, or recognising it too late;
- problems registering with, or staying with, a GP;
- a lack of accessible information and communication;

- 'diagnostic overshadowing' - physical symptoms being seen by professionals in terms of the mental health problem or learning disability. For example, palpitations may be seen as 'all in the mind' - which misperception can result in the neglect of real physical conditions;
- low take-up of health screening services;
- inappropriate stereotypes, negative attitudes and assumptions about the quality of a disabled person's life held by some healthcare professionals.

The Government is prioritising programmes to reduce health inequalities and improve the nation's general health. Initiatives such as Valuing People (in England), Fulfilling the Promises (in Wales) and the English and Welsh National Service Frameworks for Mental Health and for Children include specific actions on physical health, but the success of these initiatives is unclear, and it is widely held that targets and aspirations they set out remain unmet.

The DRC's investigation will complement these existing initiatives by seeking out good practice and uncovering existing barriers that prevent disabled people's access to primary healthcare.

The investigation will break new ground in its breadth and depth. It will consult widely to gather evidence from individuals and organisations on the ability of disabled people with learning difficulties and people with mental health problems to access primary care health services in England and Wales. It will also analyse primary care health data; and four primary healthcare bodies in England and Wales will be independently monitored to identify barriers facing people with learning disabilities or with mental health problems and the most effective solutions.

Consultation will be conducted using a dedicated website where people can register their views, as well as targeted questionnaires, face to face interviews, road-show focus groups and independently chaired formal hearing sessions.

Bert Massie, Chairman of the DRC, said: "The Government's major commitment to improving the nation's health could risk leaving out significant groups in our population. Unless the inequalities between people with learning disabilities, people with mental health problems and non-disabled people are seriously addressed, we could find the gap widening.

"Primary healthcare is the gateway to the rest of the health service - 90% of patient journeys begin and end here. It is therefore vital that these two impairment groups are catered for. This Formal Investigation is a positive opportunity to share concerns

and best practice on tackling health inequalities and is designed to close the stark health gap."

Mayur Lakhani, Chairman of the Royal College of GPs, said:

"We welcome this investigation. This group of patients has particular needs and yet currently they have poorer health outcomes. It is an important function of GPs to iron out health inequalities - we are committed to promoting excellent care for all patients whatever their needs."

The DRC has launched a website for individuals, organisations and primary health service providers to submit their experiences. Visit [www.drc-gb.org/health](http://www.drc-gb.org/health) from Friday 10 December 2004.

The Formal Investigation will run from December 2004 - May 2006 when the findings and recommendations will be announced.