

Friday October 6th 2023

Stroke Foundation calls for a cross-political party overhaul of NZ’s “unfair, unethical” health and disability system

The Stroke Foundation of New Zealand is urging all political parties in this month’s election to “right a major societal wrong” and fix the glaring, two-tiered inequities between our current health and disability system and the superior standards of care provided by ACC.

Foundation Chief Executive Jo Lambert says the current system is fundamentally unfair, and that all New Zealanders deserve the same standard of care and service regardless of whether they are an ACC claimant or not.

“Our 2023 Election Manifesto makes it clear that the system is due for a drastic overhaul. We are calling on all political parties to urgently address this glaring inequity in our health and disability system,” says Lambert.

“It’s an incredibly unjust situation that one person can receive a vastly superior level of care through ACC when injured due to an accident, whereas the next person, who’s experienced a debilitating stroke, is left struggling to access the right support and placed under financial strain due to their ensuing long term disabilities,” she says.

Lambert says stroke is a particularly glaring example of this discriminatory two-tiered system at work.

“If you suffer a head injury on the football field or in a car accident you’ll automatically be covered by ACC. This will likely entitle you to 80 per cent income support, treatment costs, equipment to assist in your rehabilitation, and vocational support to help your return to work. If your head injury results in a disability ACC can also cover a range of other supports, such as housing, car modifications and in-home carer support.

“However, if you experience a similar brain injury due to a stroke you won’t be covered by ACC, and may lose your income, potentially threatening your livelihood, career prospects and even the roof over your head if you can’t pay your rent or mortgage. The reality is that most New Zealanders don’t have enough savings to get them through if they’re suddenly unable to work,” says Lambert.

The Foundation says many of the people it works with are shocked to learn how limited their rehab and support options are following a stroke, a situation which can reduce both themselves and their whānau to a lifetime of hardship.

“For many, support takes too long to come and sometimes fails to even eventuate, leaving people stranded in limbo, frightened and anxious at an already confronting and stressful

time in their lives. When support does arrive it's a complicated blend of rehabilitation, disability, vocational and income assistance from several different agencies such as Te Whatu Ora, Work and Income, MSD, Whaikaha and Kainga Ora. It's hard to navigate at the best of times, let alone when trying to recover from a stroke," Lambert says.

The Stroke Foundation also claims that by not addressing this inequity, New Zealand is currently failing to meet its obligations under Article 28 (*Adequate standard of living and social protection*) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

In its September 2022 Concluding Observations Report, the UN Committee with oversight of the UNCRPD recommended that the New Zealand government: *54(b) 'Urgently address the fragmentation of the support system for persons with disabilities through a co-design and co-production process to address the inequity between Accident Compensation Corporation recipients and other persons with disabilities, including considering an integrated model of support to ensure uniform standards for all persons with disabilities.'*

"We are aware that the current Ministers for ACC, Health and Disability Issues have accepted this recommendation however they have done so 'with modification' without specifying what the modification is. There could also be a change of Government soon. It's important that any future Government follows through with sufficient resourcing and involvement of people with lived experience of stroke" says Lambert.

Auckland Stroke survivor and Foundation Board member Tereki Stewart (Ngāpuhi/Ngāti Whātua) knows just how unfair the current system can be.

He suffered a sudden stroke in December 2021. A scan diagnosed a bleed in his brain which left him paralysed down one side of his body. Because Tereki's stroke wasn't an accident he was not covered by ACC. Covid-19 meant his community rehab at home stopped after just one session and the physio was redeployed to the hospital.

"I was left to my own devices pretty much. The only option left available to me was to pay for private physiotherapy. I was basically told if I needed it I'd have to pay for it myself," he says.

Thankfully he had an extremely understanding employer who paid for voice-recognition software so that he could keep working to pay the bills. But he says its frustrating his brain injury was treated differently because it wasn't caused by a car, sport or work-related incident.

"There's a real unfairness in the system, its simply not right."

The Stroke Foundation is calling on all political parties to take this opportunity to right a grievous wrong.

"People with lived experience of stroke deserve a better deal and know better than any government department what actually needs to change. Let the stroke community be at the heart of any system redesign and lets start that now," says Lambert.

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For interviews and more information please contact:

Jo Lambert, CE Stroke Foundation of New Zealand
021 541 553 jo.lambert@stroke.org.nz

Lorelei Mason, Lorelei Mason Health Communications
021 555 024 lorelei@loreleimasonhealth.co.nz

Notes to editors:

Reducing the inequities in the two tier health system is the third mission (call to action) in the Stroke Foundation of New Zealand's 2023 Election Manifesto
<https://www.stroke.org.nz/election-manifesto-2023>

About the Stroke Foundation of New Zealand

The Stroke Foundation is a national charity in New Zealand focused on the prevention of and recovery from stroke. For over 40 years we have actively promoted ways to avoid stroke and dedicated ourselves to working closely with stroke survivors across the country. The generosity of New Zealanders enables us to help thousands of stroke survivors every year, providing them with critical services to ensure the best possible outcomes – not just for themselves, but also for their family/whanau and carers too. To find out more about the Stroke Foundation, go to www.stroke.org.nz