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## "A Different Light"

### **A Different Light - 28 August 2021 – “Disabled people struggle with Covid 10 Vaccination process too”**

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Last Tuesday we were all heads down totally focused on our Getting Out There EXPO which was planned to happen on Friday. Final touches were being put into place and a multiple of last minute questions were being answered. Then, BAM! We were thrown into a different reality all very strange, but horridly familiar. For an instant, we were distraught thinking we would simply have to call it off then slowly coming around to the fact that it could be postponed. The show would go on and people were enthusiastic to see this happen. My prudent PA had booked a Covid contingent date for the 1<sup>st</sup> October. BAM!

Things are the same, but different to last year’s lockdown. The issues for disabled people are different. A pinch point seems to be the level of access disabled people are getting to testing stations, particularly in Auckland with the multiple of places of interest. There is little/no information about testing stations with accessible facilities- in particular accessible toilets. A three to five hour wait with no access to a toilet is more than eye watering! I find the forty minute commute from Ruakaka into town a challenge sometimes.

Vaccination sites, on the other hand, have been a bit more accommodating. I had my second jab this week. I had booked a second vaccination and, even though I still had the slight residue of the man flu remaining, I forged ahead to the Semenoff Stadium.

When I arrived I was ushered to a parking spot. As I got out of the car to wrangle my scooter out of the boot, the person parked next to me, said “we were told to stay in the car”, “Oh”, I said, I am here for a vaccination”. “Yes so am I”, he replied. I sat in my car and waited. After a while a PPE clad person took my booking reference and details, and shortly after I was told to drive towards a tent to a short queue of cars. I suddenly realised I was wearing a winter coat that I needed to take off. I was about to open the car door to get out to shed the garment, when I realised I wasn’t allowed to get out of the car. I stayed put and started performing a Houdin-like shrug and shuffle manoeuvre, shimmering my coat sleeves down my arm, inch by inch. My jacket was halfway off with my arms pinned to the side when one of the vaccinators

beckoned me to drive up. For what seemed like forever, I went into a fight or flight mode of undressing and somehow, after some rabid minutes of struggling, I managed to remove the coat before a scene occurred. When I finally got to the vaccinator I was breathing very heavily. "You're doing very well", said the nurse with the syringe in hand. I'm sure she thought I was having an anxiety attack. Which I probably was, but for a different reason than the jab.

Apart from that it was plain sailing. It is not, however, the same for all disabled people. People with autism who are at the higher end of the spectrum, and have difficulty to adjusting to different environments, changes and routines, are struggling. I have heard that parents with young people who have very challenging behaviours are finding it difficult to find options for their sons or daughters. But there also pockets of innovation and accommodation going on. Whangarei's Blomfield School is organising a drive through vaccination event at their Central Campus in conjunction with the Northland District Health Board so that students can be vaccinated in a familiar environment, with people who know how to support them and their families on hand.

When I watch the daily updates from Ashley Blomfield and our Prime Minister at question time, there is always a reporter who asks the questions around the numbers of Maori or Pacifica who are getting vaccinated. I wonder what the numbers are for the vaccination rates for disabled people getting vaccinated. Guess what- no one is counting.

*Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.*