

Introduction

Caring for people with spinal cord injury in the time of COVID-19: Redefining the meaning of “essential”

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The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged all of us who aim to improve the lives of people with spinal cord injury through care, research and education. In these times, the Academy of Spinal Cord Injury Professionals (ASCIP) serves an increasingly important role in maintaining connections among the different disciplines that are essential to providing comprehensive care while helping individuals and caregivers adapt to a changing environment.

I recently received this letter from one of ASCIP's newest members, who shared her perspective on her COVID-19 experience. Her insightful words encouraged me to reflect on how ASCIP can help define the priorities for the essentials of spinal cord injury care, and equip providers and researchers with the skills and knowledge they need:

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, one word stands out amongst the rest: essential. A broad, overarching classification of who and what is *essential* has been created in an effort to stop the spread. Certain workers are deemed essential and go into work, while others work from home. Many healthcare facilities are allowing only essential procedures and visits to be performed.

As cases continue to rise and the country remains in varying stages of quarantine, we need to think deeper and harder about our definition of essential. We must recognize that what is critical differs from population to population. Essentiality is not one size fits all, but rather, should be tailored to the needs of each group.

The spinal cord injury community has special care needs that differ from what is vital for other groups. The predominant definition of what is essential, as well as the impact of social distancing, limits access to care, makes medical supplies hard to find, and increases health risks for individuals with spinal cord injury.

Advances in spinal cord medicine have helped individuals with spinal cord injury improve their quality of life and increase their independence, but the pandemic challenges the ability of the SCI community to maintain their routine care and services. Many of the interventions that alleviate symptoms and restore function may not be essential in terms of being lifesaving, but often, they are life changing, enabling individuals to participate in daily life in ways that many take for granted. During the current restrictions, many of these therapies are not accessible and, as a result, people with spinal cord injury are being negatively affected.

As an interdisciplinary group of healthcare workers, the ASCIP community must acknowledge that *what is widely considered essential does not always align with what is essential to people with spinal cord injury, their caregivers, and care providers*. The spread of COVID-19 grows, and as it does, we need to adapt and determine how to provide access to care and supplies in a safe manner to the SCI community, which has been uniquely impacted by the pandemic.

Caroline A. Miller, Atrium Health, Charlotte, NC.

I want to thank Ms. Miller for her timely observations, and acknowledge and thank each of you for your tremendous

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dedication and hard work. As we all adapt and learn how to best treat our patients in these trying times, it is essential for each of you to lean on and benefit from the community of ASCIP members, and take advantage of ASCIP's opportunities to network and learn virtually.

This year, you can attend our virtual annual conference – One Vision Online – and our 2020 Virtual SCI Board Review Course, and access on demand webinars on a variety of topics. Visit <https://www.academyscipro.org/> to register.