Complaint

Mass Vaccination Hub, Homebush

1 August 2021

I have several chronic health conditions and was vaccinated under phase 1b of the mass vaccination roll out. Using the eligibility tracker, my 35 year old partner registered for the Pfizer vaccine as the carer/ support person of someone with chronic illness.

On Sunday 1 August, after waiting 2 months for the appointment and standing 2 hours in the queue, my partner was ushered to his vaccine 'pod', with a nurse and vials of the vaccine in front of him. He explained why he thought he qualified for Pfizer and the nurse asked for paperwork. We didn't have any, nor were we told we needed any when he booked. The nurse called her manager, who asked what my partner did for a job. He replied (he works in an art gallery) and explained again why he thought he was eligible for Pfizer as my support person. I was standing next to my partner at the time, and the woman said that 'since I was standing there', he wasn't eligible to be vaccinated with Pfizer as my support person. She said the Pfizer jabs were going to health care workers who needed them more, and that he could get Astra Zeneca on the spot but couldn't have Pfizer. My partner hadn't spoken to his doctor about the AZ vaccine, as Pfizer is the recommended vaccine for his age, so we left without him being vaccinated.

At the time we were both embarrassed and felt guilty—this woman heavily implied we were trying to 'wrought the system', but afterwards I became convinced that proper communication had not taken place, and there was a degree of ableism involved in her treatment.

I was not spoken to once in the entire interaction. The woman assumed I was my partner's partner without asking either of us. She did not ask what my conditions were, or how they affected me, or what type or level of care my partner provided. Because I was 'standing there' next to my partner, she assumed that I was well enough. I have 'invisible' illnesses. My conditions are chronic and changeable. I have flare ups that leave me incapacitated. Just because I was standing there didn't mean I was, or would normally be, well.

There are millions of people in Australia with invisible illnesses like me. We are more likely to have waited months or sometimes years to receive our diagnoses. We are more likely to have to prove to medical professionals, again and again, that our pain and experience of illness is real. This experience at the Mass Vaccination Hub was distressing and humiliating for me and my partner. Perhaps I should have spoken up, but in the moment, I was made to feel ashamed and a fraud. There was no space left for me to speak about my experience.

If I had been asked any questions about my conditions and how my partner factored into my care, and had still been told that we didn't qualify, I would have been disappointed but understood the situation. I would have felt that my experience had been heard instead of invalidated.

I understand that NSW is in the midst of a COVID-19 crisis, and health professionals are under immense pressure. I understand that we have small supplies of Pfizer that need to be prioritised to those who need it most. But health professionals should not make ablest judgements based on appearance, and should inquire into people's circumstances when they seek medical care, especially when seeking vaccination is what we are being told to do to end the current COVID crisis.

I should also note that the woman we spoke to did not ask my partner any questions about his health, to ascertain whether the Astra Zeneca vaccine would be right for him.

We were both treated dismissively, quickly, and without a basic compassion or understanding. The experience was distressing.