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MEDIA RELEASE

Sick shoppers are denied access to toilets: new report

People with serious illnesses who require urgent toilet access are still being shunned by retailers, a new survey has found.

Hundreds of people with Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis, two debilitating conditions that can cause severe diarrhoea, have shared stories of their pain and embarrassment after being denied access to toilets at retail outlets.

The national survey, conducted by Crohn's & Colitis Australia (CCA), found that 41 per cent of respondents who required urgent access to a toilet were told to go elsewhere, even when the nearest public toilets were a long distance, and often locked.

A further 61 per cent had difficulty accessing facilities. The worst offenders were petrol stations, cafes and retail shopping strips. More than half of the people denied access were turned away after explaining their illness, and producing a card outlining their need for urgent access to a toilet.

Many people were told the toilets were only for paying customers and some were forced to buy petrol to access facilities. Some children were also denied access to the toilet during class time.

Heidelberg's Amber Miall, 38, knows all too well how difficult it can be to access a toilet when urgently needed.

Ms Miall, who has Crohn's disease, fronts a new TV campaign to raise awareness of the condition and the needs of the people living with the illness.

"People need to understand that when you go into a store or a servo, if you ask for the toilet key and they say I will just serve this customer first, it's the difference between making it to the loo or not," she said. "When I need to use the bathroom, it's really urgent and I don't have a minute to wait, I don't even have 10 seconds."

More than 61,000 Australians have Crohn's disease or colitis, collectively known as inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), with an economic cost of \$2.7 billion every year.

The disease is expected to rise by 23 per cent by 2020, and is more prevalent than epilepsy, multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis.

CCA chief executive Francesca Manglaviti said the survey results were disappointing, and showed retailers needed to be better educated about the needs of people living with Crohn's and colitis.

"It appears nothing much has changed since we last surveyed our members about toilet access in 2008," Ms Manglaviti said. "We really need retailers to be more compassionate when it comes to people with illnesses such as Crohn's and colitis to get urgent access to toilets.

"Retailers and their employees need to understand that people living with this disease can't wait. They can't follow directions to public toilets that can be a great distance away, and might even be locked or vandalised. When they need to go, they need to go immediately.

“Many of our members found they had to go through the embarrassment of explaining the ins and outs of their illness for the chance to use the toilets. Even then, they weren't always successful in gaining access. This is simply not good enough in a compassionate society.”

The survey also found:

- 54 per cent suffered an embarrassing toilet accident in public;
- 70 per cent won't leave the house due to concerns about accessing toilets when they are experiencing a disease flare up; and
- 77 per cent had stopped certain activities for fear of having an accident, including going shopping, catching public transport, going on holiday and playing sport.

CCA issues members with a 'Can't Wait' card that can be shown to retailers, identifying them as someone with Crohn's or colitis, requesting the holder be given access to toilet facilities.

Just 14 per cent of people using the cards said they had noticed a change in attitude since last surveyed in 2008.

“This shows that we need to get the Can't Wait card more widely recognised by the business community,” Ms Manglaviti said. “People with Crohn's or colitis should be able to go out and conduct their business with the confidence that they can access a toilet when needed.”

She said CCA would be highlighting the issue with major retail chains and associations.

May is National Crohn's and Colitis Awareness Month. For more information phone 1800 138 029 or go to www.crohnsandcolitis.com.au.

ENDS

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About Crohn's & Colitis Australia™ (CCA)

- CCA is a registered not-for-profit national organisation funded entirely through membership fees, donations and fundraising activities.
- CCA does not receive any federal or state government funding.
- CCA is the peak body representing Australians living with Crohn's disease and colitis.
- CCA's mission is to support the Crohn's and colitis community with a focus on confidential support programs, including education, advocacy, counselling, increasing awareness and generating and utilising funds for research and programs.
- For more information visit www.crohnsandcolitis.com.au or phone 1800 138 029.