

Physical Disability Australia's Position Statement on the Treatment of Passengers with Physical Disabilities on Airlines and in Australian Airports

27 OCTOBER 2023

Physical Disability Australia (PDA) is deeply concerned about the recent incident involving Dr Dinesh Palipana OAM, a person with a physical disability and PDA Ambassador, who was mistreated during a recent Virgin Australia flight out of Brisbane Airport. Tipped from his wheelchair by ground crew at Brisbane Airport, Dr Palipana believes that airline and airport staff should undergo disability and inclusion training and listen to passengers with disability and their carers.

The frequency of avoidable air travel challenges and accessibility failures reported to the Disability Royal Commission point to a need for a complete overhaul of the procedures for supporting people with disability travelling by air. Commission Chair Hon Ronald Sackville AO KC wrote to the CEOs of Australia's airlines and domestic airports outlining suggestions made by people with disability. These included reports around accessibility and airline practices/systems that fail to provide inclusive air travel experiences for all air travellers.

PDA President and WA State Director, Andrew Fairbairn, stated that he has heard many complaints from both his Board of Directors and members regarding issues with airline travel, both domestically and internationally. "I have spoken with many people with physical disability and heard some very alarming accounts of mistreatment and discrimination I hold major concerns for the safety and wellbeing of our members and all people with disability travelling by air."

Tammy Milne, PDA's Tasmanian Associate Director says she often encounters difficulties travelling with Australian airlines. "I require a wheelchair from the boarding gate to my seat on the plane and assistance to get into it. I am boarded before other passengers and given an aisle seat. This causes problems when other passengers needed to use the other seats on my row, and I needed to move out of the way let them through which is a painful and humiliating experience. This happens almost every time I fly".

Nick Schumi, PDA's South Australian Director, says he has similar problems with international airlines. "Fiji Airlines were unaware that I was travelling with a wheelchair when I checked in, even though they had been informed in advance when the booking was made. It was a 5 to 6 hour direct flight and I wanted to make sure the plane had an aisle width wheelchair accessible seat so that I could get to and from the toilet. I asked the check-in staff to make sure there was one available when I would need to use it. When I actually called a flight attendant to assist me to go to the toilet, I was told the aisle chair was missing so my only option was to get two attendants to physically assist me in shuffling to the toilet with them holding me up. This experience was really embarrassing and stripped me of my dignity. I have not received an apology or reassurance that this will not happen again next time I fly."

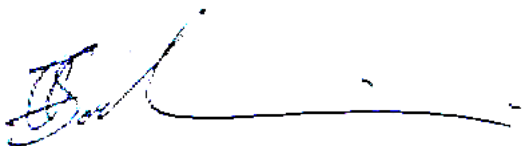
This lack of understanding of the needs of people with physical disability and the lack of respect shown to passengers with physical disability by Australian airports and the airlines that use them is unacceptable and must be addressed by airports and the airlines that use them in a systematic and rigorous manner.

PDA calls on all Australian airports and airlines to:

1. Uphold the dignity and respect of all passengers, including individuals with physical disabilities. This includes providing all necessary assistance with check-in, boarding and disembarkation, baggage collection and connection to accessible ground transport.
2. Provide all staff including check-in clerks, flight attendants and ground crew with comprehensive training on how to appropriately interact with and assist passengers with disabilities and properly handle their mobility aids and other assistive technology devices.
3. Upgrade all accessibility measures including boarding ramps, aisle wheelchairs, passenger hoists, toilets, and seating arrangements to better meet the needs of passengers with disability in a respectful and dignified manner.
4. Establish and communicate clear policies and procedures for supporting passengers with disability to complete their journeys respectful manner. This includes non-discriminatory guidelines for boarding and disembarking aircraft and providing appropriate on-ground and in-flight assistance, and the provision of information about their rights and the support available to them throughout their journey.
5. Work in collaboration with national peak disability bodies such as ours better understand the unique challenges faced by passengers with disabilities so that they can develop and implement world's best practice inclusive policies and practices that enhance the overall travel experience for passengers with disability.

PDA invites all Australian disability organisations, people living with disability and those who support us to join in this call for Australian airports and airlines do deliver the changes that will create respectful and supportive air travel experiences for all passengers with disability as a matter of urgency.

Signed for and on behalf of Physical Disability Australia



ANDREW FAIRBAIRN
PRESIDENT



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About Us:

Physical Disability Australia (PDA) is a national peak membership-based representative organisation run by people with physical disability for people with physical disability. PDA was founded in 1995 and have over 1,200 members from all Australian States and Territories. Our purpose is to:

- Remove barriers through systematic advocacy to all levels of government to enable every Australian living with a physical disability opportunities to realise their full potential;
- Proactively embrace and promote difference and diversity for an inclusive society; and
- Actively promote of the rights, responsibilities, issues, and participation of Australians with physical disability.