

Physical disabilities

–The rights of people with disabilities

This Keynotes by Judith Heumann examines the role of physical therapists in removing barriers to disabled people. It is based on her keynote speech at the 15th International Congress of the World Confederation for Physical Therapy, June 2007 in Vancouver, Canada.

In the richest and poorest countries of the world we have seen progress being made to advance the rights of disabled people. These efforts have been led by disabled people, families concerned professionals and allies. Physical therapists have a role to play in removing the barriers that exclude disabled people from participating in their communities, and advancing the human and civil rights of disabled people.

Studying disability

Most people enter physical therapy to make a qualitative difference to people's lives, but there are not always sufficient opportunities for students to learn from the people they are working for, to find out what their real hopes and dreams are and how they can become change agents in a social movement.

More and more universities are establishing disability studies programmes. These provide a better understanding of the history of the disability movement, the types of barriers that have existed and why it is relevant to integrate the views of disabled people into the fields they are studying.

Those teaching at university level should ask themselves:

- Are you putting together reading

lists so that your students can learn more about these issues?

- Do you invite disabled people to come and lecture in your classes?
- Are your students encouraged to work as volunteers with disabled people's organisations so that they can learn first hand about the needs of people with disabilities and approaches the organisations are taking?

Examples of therapists helping bring change

Therapists can use their knowledge to strengthen the disability rights movement. Here are four examples of different ways that therapists have used their professional skills while also learning to become an important part of reform.

1. The Center for Independent Living (CIL) in Berkeley, California

Established in the 1970s, this was the first organisation of its kind in the US, empowering disabled people by listening to what they needed, creating support services to address those needs, and developing and implementing legislation.

Today there are more than 400 similar programmes in the US, Canada, Europe, Latin America and Asia. The Berkeley CIL had a number of therapists involved from the beginning - working with disabled people to evaluate the accommodation they needed and getting local government to fund home modifications. They helped educate workers and decision makers about the way disabled people can socially participate and contribute to their communities if barriers are removed.

2. Philippines Organization of Disabled Persons

This has been working to get children with significant disabilities into mainstream schools. With support from the Danish government, the organisation runs a project where physical therapy students come to their 65 sites around the country and provide treatment and advice to young people and their families. More and more schools are taking these students and thousands of parents are learning how to fight for the rights of their children.


3. Milestone, Pakistan

This is an independent living centre very similar to that in Berkeley California. Before the Pakistan earthquake in 2005, disabled people working at the centre primarily helped disabled people learn how to take care of themselves physically – how to transfer, push wheelchairs, etc. After the earthquake, they went out in trucks trying to find where the disabled people were – more than 800 people had spinal cord injuries after the quake.

They wanted to get into hospitals to provide similar services to those they had already been providing. Initially they had difficulty because they were not seen as professionals, but soon they became part of the hospital work. The charity Handicapped International helped by bringing in physical therapists. With support from Japan, Pakistan is now putting money into creating another 40 independent living centres.

4. Proyecto Proximo, Mexico

In one of the poorest areas of Mexico, disabled people come to live in a community led by disabled



people. It helps them get the low cost equipment they need to enable them to become more productive. Physical therapists help on a voluntary basis, some staying on permanently because they find their work is producing tangible results.

International moves to remove barriers

Over the past 20-30 years disabled people have come together to fight for the removal of barriers which have denied them opportunities to attend school, work, receive health care, live in accessible housing, have access to accessible transport and technology, to marry and have children. They have had to persuade governments and the United Nations that the barriers faced were so common that they had to be addressed through legal reforms.

Organisations such as Disabled People's International, the World Blind Union, the World Federation of the Deaf, the International Disability Alliance, the Global Partnership for Disability and Development and hundreds of local disabled people's organisations, are having a positive impact at the local, national and international levels.

They have empowered disabled people so that they can become leaders, and set an agenda for reform in their countries. They have learned that it is important for them to partner with a broad variety of groups to produce change – but this is not always easy, since many partners have little knowledge or experience of how disabled people can contribute.

National and local governments and organisations such as the International Labor Organization (ILO), World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank, along with national development bodies, have begun to support international disability organisations, developing projects to help end poverty. They are realising that poverty will not be

reduced unless the needs of disabled people are addressed. Quality research is critical in countries with limited experience and limited resources. We can learn from the work that has been done in developed countries but we must use approaches that can be achieved in countries with fewer resources.

WCPT has played an important role in the WHO's work on reviewing community based rehabilitation (CBR). CBR projects aim to reach some of the poorest and most remote areas in poor countries. They bring together physical therapists, disabled people, families and community leaders to provide low cost rehabilitation services. The collaborative approach is a good model for providing meaningful assistance to the disabled person and family and allows local people who are fearful of disability to learn about the valuable role disabled people can play in their communities.

The UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities

Removing the stigma of disability is one of the biggest challenges we face. In 2002 the United Nations began to develop a UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This convention was deemed necessary by the disability community and gained the support of many in the UN because of well-documented discrimination against disabled people around the world.

From 2002 until 2006 disabled people worked with UN member states to craft this document, and for the first time in UN history, representatives from disabled people's organisations were given the opportunity to speak at the UN ad hoc sessions. The result was the adoption of the convention on 13 December 2006. Now countries need to sign the convention, ratify it at national level and then implement it – a process that will take many years. Even wealthier countries that have passed legislation providing

rights for disabled people have not seen rapid progress. But there has been progress. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol entered into force on the 3rd May 2008 after the 20th ratification.

Physical therapists and the Convention

A number of articles in the convention are relevant to the work of physical therapists – referring to children, education, health, habilitation, rehabilitation and employment. The convention provides great opportunities for progress.

Physical therapists can play a leadership role, by:

- encouraging colleagues to learn more about the convention
- seeking out local opportunities to work with disabled people's organisations
- encouraging governments to pass the convention at national level, and then working for its implementation.

I would encourage all physical therapists to commit themselves to becoming agents for social change to help advance the rights of disabled people around the world.

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities:

<http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?navid=12&pid=150>

Judith Heumann is Director of the Department of Disability Services in Washington DC, USA.

Keynotes is a series of occasional papers dealing with important professional, practice and policy issues relevant to physical therapists across the world, and to the development of physical therapy internationally.

Keynotes are written by independent authors and do not necessarily represent WCPT's opinion. For further information contact:

WCPT, 4th floor, Charles House, 375 Kensington High Street, London W14 8QH
E-mail: info@wcpt.org
www.wcpt.org

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