

Disability rights: accomplishments and new frontiers

In 2015 the United States is celebrating the 25th anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This act protects the civil rights of individuals with disabilities by preventing discrimination in the areas of employment, state and local government, public accommodations, and telecommunications. This landmark legislation was the result of public protests and lobbying by disability activists over many years. Previous legislation mandated education of children in the 'least restrictive environment.' Other countries have similar laws that protect the rights of their citizens with disabilities.

Over my lifetime, many individuals with developmental disabilities have transitioned from institutional to community settings. As a physical therapy student, prior to the passage of the ADA, I worked for a children's hospital contracted to initiate the provision of cerebral palsy specialty care to long-term residents in an institutional setting. The medical advice to parents at the time of their child's admission was that he or she 'would have better care in an institution' or that their siblings and parents would otherwise 'suffer under the burden of their care.' This experience made me acutely aware of the lack of equal rights for individuals with disabilities.

Reducing physical barriers in the community, the work place, and educational settings created physical access, but full inclusion in community programs has been more challenging. Some of the greatest strides in inclusion have been made in art, recreation, and sports programs. In the arts, changes began by providing physical access to the audience and progressed to providing access to the stage. Inclusion in sports and recreation programs in the community has expanded opportunities for physical health and social networking. There are also opportunities for people with disabilities to compete on a more 'level playing field' through programs such as the Paralympics, adapted dance programs, and camps. These programs provide role models via exposure to successful adolescents and adults with similar disabilities. The Special Olympics World Games, held in Los Angeles this year, provided a source of pride, competition, and physical health to participants with intellectual disabilities.

There were those who expressed concern that ADA regulations would burden small businesses and that implementation would be too costly. In contrast, society has greatly benefited from disability accommodations. Curb cuts allow wheelchair access to sidewalks but also safe passage for infant strollers and children learning to bicycle. Restrooms that accommodate wheelchairs also provide access for young families. Wheelchair ramps assist workers of all types to transport heavy cargo. Closed captioning allows us to view television and movies in other languages. Large sized fonts on smartphones and computers assist far-sighted users. Most of us have experienced a temporary disability that made us appreciate these types of accommodations. As the median age of the world's population

continues to rise, the need for disability accommodations will increase accordingly.

Technology is a new frontier. The Internet allows individuals with disabilities to work and play without the need for disclosure. Electronic communication devices and voice recognition software provide alternatives to typing. Driverless cars, stair-climbing wheelchairs, 3D printing for prostheses, and robotic limbs are just some of the many new innovations. Gaming technology has created new avenues for recreation and therapy. Newer technology allows the operation of videogames using gestures or analog inputs for people with fine motor difficulties. The use of video gaming to promote exercise has improved adherence and increased the mental focus required to effect neural, physiological, and musculoskeletal changes. New technology, however, is not always created with disability in mind. Second generation smartphones were not accessible to people with visual disabilities as keypads with buttons were removed. Similar to the design of buildings without architectural barriers, it is far more efficient and less costly to design technology with disability access than to retrofit later. Partnerships with industry and the disability community are needed to optimize technology development.

There is still much to do. As health care professionals and educators, we have embraced the World Health Organization International Classification of Functioning, which promotes research at the level of Participation and consideration of Personal and Environmental factors in addition to the traditional focus at the Body Structure/Function and Activity levels. As we embark on the development of an International Alliance of Academies of Childhood Disability (IAACD) that supports health care in developing countries, we can promote the rights of people with disabilities in local communities. Individuals with disabilities and their families are becoming important collaborators in American Academy of Cerebral Palsy and Developmental Medicine (AAPDM) research, education, and advocacy efforts. At this year's AAPDM meeting, there are presentations that focus on important topics such as employment opportunities, parent navigators, sexuality, policy-making, and stakeholder perspectives. Each of us can show respect and support by using person first language, delivering patient- and family-centered care, and by providing resources and encouragement to people with disabilities in their quest to live full and independent lives. Empowered individuals with disabilities contribute to a more diverse and empathetic society that benefits everyone.

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