



The Disabled Citizen

For far too long, a large proportion of our population has been deprived of full participation in society. In this UN International Year of Disabled Persons, it's time for a change...



□ The figures are staggering. More than 500 million people around the world are either physically or mentally handicapped or both — nearly every ninth living human being. The ratio in Canada is about one in 10, despite the fact that starvation and disease rarely cause preventable handicaps here as they do in poorer countries.

In the International Year of Disabled Persons, it is important for people to be aware of just how many among them must go through life bearing a debilitating burden. Yet if we look at the problem only in quantitative terms, we are in danger of defeating the purpose of this massive United Nations campaign. This is to gain "full participation and equality" for handicapped people. It is something that, in the final analysis, only their non-handicapped fellow citizens can achieve.

Most of us these days are content to let governments and other large agencies deal with universal problems. And indeed, the United Nations and its member states this year are taking strong new measures to improve training, guidance, rehabilitation, research and prevention in the disablement field. But, as an Ontario government pamphlet explains it, "The success of 1981 really depends on what happens on the community level. When it comes down to it, the lives of disabled people can only become more satisfying and productive if individuals take action."

The first action each of us can take is simply to

review our attitude towards the physically and mentally disabled. Public attitudes are the sum of personal attitudes, and handicapped people will attest that the present public attitudes are anything but helpful to their cause.

They point to an "attitude barrier" which blocks them off from participation in the social and working lives of their communities. The barrier has deep foundations in the way normal people look at the disabled as a kind of breed apart.

"It is only in statistics that people are disabled in millions," says Sir John Wilson, Director of the International Association for the Prevention of Blindness. "Each individual is disabled individually in his own predicament." Because the disabled are regarded as a monolithic group, people are disinclined to recognize the individuality of every disabled man, woman and child.

Instead, they attribute to them a standard set of mythical characteristics. Among these are that they cannot be responsible for themselves; that they cannot hold down jobs; that they prefer each other's company; that they are incapable of normal personal relationships; that they need charity to get along.

Even those who have their best interests at heart can fall into the habit of categorizing and stereotyping them. According to Rodney Carpenter, a young Canadian afflicted with cerebral palsy, "Parents and teachers subconsciously, and some-

times consciously, treat the handicapped, regardless of age, as a group whose members all have the same wants and desires."

The aspirations thus ascribed to them usually fall far short of what would be expected of a normal person. In words and deeds, it is impressed on them that they will never be able to do this or that because of their handicap.

It is understandable that those closest to young handicapped people should cast themselves in the role of protectors. The world is cruel to the uncommon and the weak. A natural urge arises to spare their feelings. If their aspirations are not high, they stand less chance of being disappointed and hurt.

While a certain degree of protection from the rough and tumble may be called for, over-protectiveness can be dangerous. A person who is not sufficiently exposed to society may develop an exaggerated fear of it, withdrawing into a sheltered and unfulfilling existence by associating only with his or her own kind.

Regrettably enough, this fits in conveniently with the priorities of society. People feel more comfortable when the handicapped are out of sight and out of mind.

In some countries, their seclusion gives rise to pitiful conditions. "Negative attitudes towards people with impairments, causing children to be hidden from sight, kept in dark rooms, deprived of stimulation and normal social contact, ostracized, constitute much graver disabilities than the impairments themselves," *UNICEF News* reports.

In western nations, the pattern has been more organized but only a little less heartless. As Alf Morris, Britain's first Minister for the Disabled, put it: "We made prisons on the edge of town for people who did not meet the norms."

At various stages in history, the handicapped have been perceived as public menaces (witness the hunchback Quasimodo in Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*), as being fit solely to be beggars, and as being permanently ill although they might be perfectly healthy apart from their disablement.

Large numbers of physically-fit handicapped people are still confined in hospitals or residential institutions in Canada today. Mentally handicapped people are not only put in institutions, but in wings of mental hospitals — because, it is said, there is nowhere else for them to go.

*"If you're not like all the
rest of us, to hell with you"*

Most handicapped Canadians are less drastically isolated; almost 90 per cent of them live in ordinary communities. But whether they are in their homes, schools, or sheltered workshops, far too many remain segregated from the able majority. Despite any number of remarkable exceptions, the general effect is that the handicapped remain hidden. Their absence from the social mainstream makes it easy for the majority to overlook their rights.

Handicapped people are discriminated against. In a recent magazine article, for instance, a woman with multiple sclerosis described being told there were no vacancies in a succession of apartment buildings although the "for rent" signs were still on display. It is against the law in Canada to discriminate against anybody on the basis of their race, sex, religion, national origin or colour. But until recently in most provinces, no such specific protection has been extended to the handicapped.

That situation is now changing, thanks partly to the attention focussed on their concerns by the International Year. It has been recognized that exceptional rights are needed for this exceptional class. But even when these rights are enshrined in law, the handicapped will make little headway if the public is unwilling to go along with the spirit of them. It will be up to the able people of the community to see that the handicapped enjoy the rights they deserve.

There is no denying that, as matters stand, the handicapped are second-class citizens. The evidence of what a low value the rest of society places on them is all around. Access to many buildings and public transportation systems is denied to physically handicapped persons by

escalators and doors that are impossible to negotiate in a wheelchair. Various other facilities are designed with no thought given to their special condition. It is almost like saying: "If you're not like the rest of us, to hell with you."

Their second-class status extends to finding work. About 2.8 per cent of the Canadian labour force is composed of handicapped people who are officially classified as employable, though the true number of the employable handicapped is probably higher because many have despaired of finding work and are not registered in the labour force. Of those who are, 50 per cent are unemployed, including 80 per cent of the employable blind and 90 per cent of employable paraplegics. The only explanation for these statistics is that employers believe that handicapped people are indifferent and unreliable workers.

A study conducted in 1975 by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce reached the opposite conclusion. In it, 85 per cent of the employers of physically handicapped workers reported that their production, attendance, safety and turnover records were the same as or better than the rest. The quality of their work was at least as high as the average. The contrast between these findings and the unemployment figures indicates a prejudice against handicapped people looking for jobs.

Let's re-examine the question of just who is inferior to whom

The prejudice against handicapped people in general is quite blatant. It may not be conscious, but it is not at all hard to see. It shows itself in ways that prejudice against any group always shows — in not wanting to be with them, in calling them names (usually behind their backs), in thoughtless jokes about them, in putting them down as an inferior class.

"In our feelings toward the disabled we have not moved a great distance beyond those many generations of our ancestors who believed that a handicap like blindness or a limited intellect was God's punishment for sin," writes Robert Fulford, Editor of *Saturday Night* magazine. "The blind, the crippled, the deformed trouble us emotionally. They dismay and frighten us, and most of us do all we can to stay away from them."

The handicapped grow wearily familiar with the symptoms of this state of mind — the mixture of trepidation, embarrassment and stiff-lipped goodwill which other people display in their presence. This is what the distinguished American author and critic Wilfrid Sheed, a polio victim, calls "being treated funny." He writes: "Any affliction within reason can be gotten used to. Being treated funny cannot. Cripples do not, as you might suppose, sit around thinking, 'I'm a cripple' all day. It takes someone to remind them — the kind of people who say, 'I see you've got a new moustache,' in case you'd forgotten."

The condescension which the handicapped endure from other people stems from the vague feeling that if they are handicapped, they must be inferior. Helen Keller, the famous author and lecturer who was both blind and deaf, touched on the subject of who was inferior to whom. Shocked by the venality she encountered in normal circles, she wrote: "My darkness has been filled with the light of intelligence, and, behold, the outer day-lit world was stumbling and groping in social blindness."

"If you're not successful, your life doesn't count"

The whole concept of inferiority and superiority needs to be re-examined in any sincere effort to make full participation and equality possible for the handicapped. It should be clear that superior physical or mental ability does not make one person morally superior to another, and in the end it is moral superiority — being a good man or woman, whoever you are — that counts. But ours is a society in which material success is closely and mistakenly associated with superiority. Success is most likely to come, of course, to those with a high degree of mental and physical ability. It is a competitive society preoccupied with winning, whether in sports, business, or education. Losers are none too welcome. We like people with ability, people who achieve.

The preoccupation with achievement is such that even the media coverage of the International Year has consisted predominantly of success stories. Taking nothing away from those courageous individuals who have overcome their handicaps to compete successfully in the normal world, a more valid picture might be given to the public if it were told about the multitude of disabled people who have never met with success, or come anywhere near it, because they have never had a chance.

"What really annoys me is this attitude many people have that your life doesn't count if you don't have a successful job, you're not married or are not physically attractive. There's a cheapness about the value of life that often shows in the way many folks treat handicapped people." So says Joni Eareckson, who became a paraplegic when she broke her neck at the age of 18.

Eareckson is successful in the popular sense of the term. Now 31, she is a best-selling author and sought-after public speaker. She is willing to go along with the success-oriented system by using her fame to draw attention to the plight of the physically handicapped. "Friends who are disabled look on me as a bridge between themselves and the able-bodied population who, for the most part, wouldn't give them the time of day," she told *Time* magazine.

The success syndrome weighs particularly on mentally handicapped people, who are included among the subjects of the Year of Disabled Persons, although you would hardly know it from what you see in the media. There are few success stories to be written about them. They are a neglected minority within a minority who are unable to make their presence felt except through intermediaries. Yet their fundamental needs are the same as those of the physically handicapped or anybody else: the right and opportunity to live a decent, dignified life.

It is widely agreed among experts that the answer to most of the problems of both the physically and mentally handicapped is to integrate

them as far as possible into society. The question is: is the able population ready to take them in? The most that can be said on that score is that there has been some improvement lately in public acceptance of the handicapped as part of a move towards greater public acceptance of minorities of all kinds.

"A tragic waste of human potential and productivity"

The special needs of the handicapped are gaining recognition from governments and the media, and enlightened corporations such as the Royal Bank of Canada have been trying to meet them. In a statement to the Bank's annual meeting this year, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Rowland C. Frazee announced a three-part program linked to the International Year. It entails sponsoring a film designed to raise public consciousness of the potential of the disabled, further improving accessibility to the Bank's branches and offices, and further improving its hiring practices towards the disabled. "I think we can all agree that when disabled persons are prevented from making their full contribution to society by unnecessary physical and mental barriers, this constitutes a tragic waste of human potential and productivity," Mr. Frazee said.

No one will ever know how much energy, talent and ingenuity has been lost to our economy by failing to take advantage of what the handicapped have to offer. But behind the practical considerations lies a question of social justice in a society that prides itself on its humanitarian ideals. In our callousness towards the handicapped, we of the able majority have erected artificial barriers to their pursuit of happiness. It follows that it is our responsibility — not theirs — to bring these barriers down.

So far in history, the handicapped have always been expected to adjust to society. The time has come for society to start adjusting to them. This will not be accomplished without a deep re-examination of our social values. It presents a test of how unselfish, humane and open-minded we are willing to be.