

SUBTLE FORMS OF ABUSE AND THEIR LONG TERM EFFECTS

by

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There has been an acknowledgement of the amount of sexual abuse and its effects on individuals recently. Media outlets have produced presentations and it has been established that sexual abuse is a common experience, particularly for people of all ages who live out their lives in institutions. It has been shown that people with learning difficulties have experienced sexual abuse but little has been written or portrayed with regard to people who have a physical or sensory impairment. It is known that all disabled people, whatever their impairment, are subjected to abuse in many forms, and while there is no way in which there is a desire to disregard sexual abuse, it is on the more subtle forms of abuse that this article will concentrate.

Disabled people often find themselves in disempowering situations where they are reliant on the assistance of one or more people in order to live their lives. For many there is no opportunity to choose who will support them and how many people will be part of their daily routine. People will come into the lives of disabled people and go out of their lives and these people have great power and control. Over the last two years there has been an opportunity to witness countless abusive incidents. Many people would deny that these situations or scenarios could be called 'abusive' and be deemed humiliating, degrading, oppressive or discriminatory due to the fact that they would feel their personal actions, their status or their corporate practices were being challenged or threatened. It could be debated that much of what happens is concerned with 'educating' non-disabled people. It is important to expose what takes place in the lives of disabled people in order to begin a thorough examination of such abuse. Abusive practices in many family units, in day centres, segregated schools, residential institutions and in the homes of isolated disabled people cannot be allowed to continue and must be dealt with in a way which will be an empowering experience for disabled people.

Some of the most abusive incidents which occur in the lives of disabled people have become common practice. This subtle abuse is not recognised as cruelty by those who dispense it but those on the receiving end know only too well what is going on. To combat it disabled people either give up the fight or go on to build their own defensive structures for survival and it is usually the latter option that is adopted. Disabled people often have their own mechanisms for dealing with abuse but it can be difficult to have a positive approach when abuse is constantly and consistently being applied. To be in an environment where a disabled person has to be in a queuing system to get out bed, go to the toilet and to get back into bed, to be bathed and fed is abusive. The abuse is compounded if actions undertaken are performed by a stranger, by someone who has no understanding, is not of the sex or culture chosen by the disabled person. Day in and day out thousands of disabled people are in this system. To be told to wait, whether it be for a glass of water or a bedpan time after time comes into the same abusive category. Often disabled people will refrain from taking liquids because systems prevent them access to the toilet when they want to avail themselves to this facility. There is also the issue of asking to go to the toilet and the request being ignored. When the task is finally carried out it can be in a manner which leaves the disabled person feeling that they are a 'burden', that they are asking too much or too often or feeling that they should show their 'gratitude'. These feelings are created by a system which expects disabled people to be supported without financial remuneration or to be supported within a system over which they have little or no control.

A further illustration is that of pain control. A difference can occur in the way pain relief is delivered to disabled people from that given to people who are diagnosed as terminally ill. It stems from the fact that if a person is ill and radiological or other medical explorations can prove a person should be experiencing pain, then they are likely to receive some kind of pain control, not necessarily the most appropriate or effective. For disabled people there is a block in knowledge and understanding and pain relief is often withheld or there is the need to wait ... and wait ... and it is known that in certain circumstances placebos are given in place of genuine pain medication.

The policies and practices which deny disabled people the experience of knowing their sexuality and to enjoy the same opportunities as non-disabled people in expressing their sexual feelings is equally abusive. Little is done to ensure that disabled people have access to privacy and to the support they require if they are to have a lifestyle which enables the whole range of

feelings, emotions and physical acts to take place. To force disabled people to live celibate lives which are not of their choosing and to actively discourage or prevent disabled people from the fundamental feelings of touch remains despicable.

The many types of subtle (and not so subtle) abuse witnessed in day centres have been a painful experience and left much anger. One disabled young man was asked if he would like a cup of tea and he replied in the affirmative by nodding his head. He communicated by using an electronic word board which had recently been fitted to his wheelchair but had been incorrectly positioned so that it was a struggle to operate it. The person supplying the tea requested that he spell out that he wanted the cup of tea and after initially refusing, he relented. The long process that produced "I would like a cup of tea", was followed by "Not until you say 'Please.'" If it takes that kind of treatment to get a cup of tea it has to be acknowledged it is hardly likely that this young man will go on to have a full, satisfying and dignified life and he had already learned the lesson of when to scream out and when to keep quiet in order to survive. It was a very warm day and at the same time as the young man was struggling to gain a cup of tea, a volunteer started by pouring out full glasses but as the juice in the jug became less so did the amount of liquid poured into each glass. The volunteer was seen to pick up the almost empty glass and put it into the hand of a disabled person with the words, 'Make the most of it because this is all you're getting'.

An extract from a BBC Television 'Everyman' documentary portraying Professor John Hull, the blind theologian, shows him having a meal with his family. In the course of the conversation he says, "What drives me berserk is when I am eating socially and people try to help me and that business one gets into when some kind person says 'Oh, John, there's one last pea on your plate, now you haven't quite got it! It's at about three o'clock'. I just can't bear eating my food under that kind of commentary". The strain of this kind of subtle abuse can bring a disabled person to breaking point as it continually wears down the human spirit.

Lunch, on a recent training course for disabled people was served buffet style. Disabled people were helping themselves to refreshments and the disabled person who required assistance selected a couple of sandwiches. Only one was served and shortly a request was made for the second sandwich. Back came the retort, 'You know you shouldn't have any more, you'll get too heavy'. On another occasion a fostered disabled ten year old

girl told her foster mother that she had wanted to ask the taxi driver who transported her to her segregated school to take her to the seaside. The girl went on to say that she had decided against asking the driver because she knew it was wrong. Much later the foster mother decided to ask the ten year old why she wanted to go to the seaside. The girl replied that if she could get to a deserted beach she felt she would be safe to scream. Her screaming would express some of the frustration and anger she felt over the repressive and protective practices she was getting from her parents which she felt she was unable to do anything about. This says a great deal for that girl's experience of being a disabled person and the effect her parents' treatment will have as the years go by. Who will be there for her, recognise her situation and feelings and take action?

At a meeting, a young woman with a hearing impairment was describing her experience in the local hospital's casualty department. The doctor who examined her spoke to her through a face mask. By the time the woman had communicated that it would be helpful for the mask to be removed so that she could at least lip read, the doctor had moved on to the next casualty.

Day in and day out these are the subtle and no so subtle forms of abuse with which disabled people have to contend. For most disabled people there is nowhere where expression can be given to the way in which their lives have been abused. Exposing the abusive situations which take place on a daily basis for most disabled people may begin a process of change in practices and attitudes. Disabled people seldom have the opportunity to get specialist assistance with divulging what has been happening in their lives. The Care in the Community Act mentions participation and choice for disabled people but it is unlikely to have any effect on the way in which subtle abuse in its often monotonous and sometimes threatening and cunning forms is dispensed. Policies and practices are not going to change significant numbers of disabled lives until disabled people combat this abuse. Collectively disabled people will have an impact but there is a long way to go before isolated disabled people are liberated and are empowered to take control.

Disabled people mainly live in a world which consists of 'Wait a minute', and so their lives go by ignored, continually abused by those with power and who exert control.

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