

Disablism and Charity

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(This is a late draft of an article that appeared in GMCDP'S Coalition Magazine November 2004).

Two years ago I wrote an article for *Coalition* entitled *Social Services are dying: long live charity*. A strange title from someone who despises charity and what it usually means, and has constantly criticised and challenged social services. My point was that bad as social services is there is at least a bit of a chance of influencing what happens by using the political processes available to us. Charities are not accountable to anyone; they need to make sure that they have a reason to stay in business. Their message is clear: - "disabled people are pathetic and dependent; give money to this charity and we will take care of them and keep them out of your way". That is the good cause that so many take for granted as always being a good thing.

As I predicted Social Services are contracting out more and more of their work to charities.

The plastic bags that come through my front door urge me to give my unwanted goods so that a certain multi million pound charity can get equality for disabled people. Sorry but I am a bit puzzled by that – who ever got equality through people filling charity bags with old clothes and cracked tea pots? But I suppose it looks better than adding they also ensure disabled kids are kept in their special segregated residential schools, enduring the physical, psychological and emotional cruelty that is called "conductive education". That would look a bit hypocritical wouldn't it?

At least they don't have the nerve to claim to be using the social model to disability in their work. But this rich charity has got the audacity to say what the meaning of the word 'disablism' is. This is a word the disabled people's movement has avoided. Does, disablism comes from negative attitudes? Thus neatly side stepping the issue of systems which segregate and pressure to 'normalise', to which this huge charity itself is party.

For us the definition of disability refers to the way in which society does not take account of people with impairments and creates separate, segregated 'special' systems to keep us on the margins of society and pressurises us to conform to some mythical idea of 'normality'. Hey isn't that what the charity run schools and residential institutions (for people with profound and multiple disabilities) do? Oh yes so it is – so how come they have this side line of making a big thing of getting international support for their equality campaign? Maybe someone of world fame has not been given the full picture.

It is up to us as disabled people to define those words which apply to us – not some charity that keeps the segregation going. The very thing that will make sure we are never equal.

I think that we can use the social model of disability to say what disablism is and in doing so we need to lay claim to the definitions over any charity that peddle segregated services. We have come a long way since the original definitions were set out and the world is a different place. But our inequality and exclusion remains - perhaps it is time to update the definitions to be more in line with the way things are now.

How about:

Disability is what people with impairment experience as a result of not being taken into account by society.

Disablism is the practice of not taking account of people with impairments, (thus creating a false notion of normality, pressure to conform to this false notion and the separate development of people with impairments).

Impairment is certain differences of appearance or functioning of mind, body or senses that society deems to be abnormal.

I think it is worth thinking about.

When wealthy disability creating charities use their massive resources to ensure that mainstream schools welcome all disabled kids, that all new homes that are built are adaptable so that no

disabled person has to live in an institution, that no airline or taxi can refuse to take a disabled person – in short when they put their money where their mouth is – then I might stop thinking that they are in this business for their own sakes and that their claim to be interested in equality is a no more than getting on the bandwagon. But then they will have put themselves out of business won't they?

Will any of the charities that at this eleventh hour claim they work for disabled people's equality really want to create a society where they put themselves out of business? If society did take account of people with impairments then there would be no need for the segregated facilities that are the bread and butter for them all.