Guidance on the Positive Portrayal of People with Disabilities

Note: Any request for the document in another format or language will be considered. See contact details on page 8.

HSC Business Services Organisation
Providing Support to Health and Social Care

Introduction

It is important that language and images emphasise the value of the lives of people with disabilities, their dignity and strength and the contribution they make.

Some words and images perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes. People with disabilities are often portrayed either as high achievers or as passive recipients of support. Repeated images of people as victims of accident, tragedy, illness or injustice reinforce stereotypes of helplessness and less value.

The Office for Disability Issues uses the following definition:

"A positive image of disability is a fair, creative and stimulating portrayal of one or more disabled people. It should be based on the social model of disability rather than medical model of disability. It could be anything from a photo, graphic or character in a storyline, to a visual or aural cue."

The **social model** looks at the barriers erected by society in terms of disabled people being able to access goods and services. It seeks to remove unnecessary barriers which prevent disabled people participating in society, accessing work and living independently. The **medical model** looks at a person's impairment and focuses on the impairment as the cause of disabled people being unable to access goods and services or being able to participate fully in society.

The words and images that are used and the way information is presented can have a negative or a positive impact on how people living with disabilities are viewed. The portrayal of people with disabilities can promote equality and inclusion or it can contribute to society's negative stereotypes.

People are often identified by their disabling condition. This labelling focuses on the person's disability and ignores the person's other attributes and roles. This can have serious health implications; if we don't focus on the whole person rather than the disability, we could potentially compound health inequalities.

A Way with Words - Using Positive Language

Language is powerful. When misused it can form, perpetuate and reinforce stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. Use of inaccurate, outdated or offensive expressions can perpetuate negative beliefs and stereotypes about people with disabilities.

Inclusive language aims to promote all people – regardless of difference – as full and valued members of society by using terms that avoid exclusion, false stereotypes, and the use of language that portrays people with disabilities as dependent, powerless, or less valued than others. Using the right language will reflect what disability the person 'has' rather than who the person 'is'.

Whenever you can:

◊   Use language that focuses on the person, not the disability. Always put the person before the disability. For example, use 'a person with an amputation' rather than 'an amputee'.

◊   Use language that conveys a positive message and emphasises abilities rather than limitations. For example 'a person who uses a wheelchair' rather than 'confined to a wheelchair'.

◊   Avoid references that dehumanise, for example never say 'a victim of' or 'suffers from' which evoke discomfort or pity and suggest constant pain and a sense of hopelessness.

◊   People with disabilities are not necessarily "special" because of their disability. It is therefore important to avoid narratives which portray disabled people in extreme terms such as "hero" or "victim", however inspirational this approach may seem.

◊   Avoid equating disability with illness. People with disabilities can be healthy, though they may have chronic diseases like arthritis or cancer. Avoid referring to a disabled person as a "patient" unless the context is a clinical setting.

TABLE: LANGUAGE TO USE

Avoid Phrases Like	Use Phrases Like
Afflicted by/victim of multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, etc.	Person who has cerebral palsy, etc., Person with cerebral palsy.
Birth defects, congenital defect, deformity	Person born with a disability, Person with a disability from birth, person who has a congenital disability.
The blind, the visually impaired	Person who is blind, Person with visual impairment or who is partially-sighted.
Confined to a wheelchair, Wheelchair-bound	Person who uses a wheelchair, A wheelchair user.
Insane, mad, demented, psychotic, lunatic, crazy, maniac, mental diseased, schizophrenic, deviant, psycho	Person with a mental health/ psychiatric disability, Person who has schizophrenia, etc.
Cripple/crippled	Person with a physical disability, Person with a mobility impairment, Person who walks with crutches.
Deaf-mute, deaf and dumb	Person who is deaf, Person who is hearing impaired.
Hard of hearing, hearing impaired	Person who is hard of hearing.
The disabled	Person with a disability, People with disabilities, A woman or man with a disability.

TABLE: LANGUAGE TO USE

Avoid Phrases Like	Use Phrases Like
Epileptic	Person who has epilepsy.
Fit, attack, spell	Seizure .
Learning disabled	Person with a learning disability.
A dyslexic	Person with dyslexia.
Handicap(ped)	Person with a disability.
Handicapped seating, parking, toilets	Accessible seating, parking, toilets .
Invalid	Person with a disability.
Spastic	Person who has spasms.
Mentally retarded, idiot, imbecile, slow, defective, feeble minded, moron, simple	Person with an intellectual disability, Persons with a learning disability.
Mongoloid, mongolism	Person with Down Syndrome.
Suffers from / stricken with.. A person who suffers from Autism or an Autistic person	An individual with Autism. (Disability is not synonymous with suffering)

A Picture Paints a Thousand Words - Using Positive Images

Positive imagery has the potential to change societal perceptions of disability and support people with disabilities to achieve full participation in everyday life.

The presence of disabled people and the way in which they are represented will influence how much attention disabled people and their families will pay to the message. If you want disabled people to respond to your message, it is important to represent their lives accurately. For example, a campaign encouraging people to work in social care should include content that assumes that disabled people will give as well as receive care.

It is important to use images of people who live with a disability in literature or campaigns for general services, not just those services that impact on or are for people with disabilities.

Furthermore, try to represent a wide range of disabilities or impairments, including non-visible impairments and health conditions.

Wherever you can:

◊ Include positive images and representations of disabled people that show disabled and non-disabled people interacting on equal terms.

◊ Include people with disabilities as those providing services, not just as users of services.

◊ Portray people with disabilities as integrated and integral members of the community, and not as set apart and segregated by their apparent difference.

A Picture Paints a Thousand Words - Using Positive Images

Avoid:

◊ Images which may be considered patronising, tokenistic or which may label people with disabilities.

◊ Portraying people with disabilities as only wheelchair or white stick users.

◊ Portraying people with disabilities as dependent upon others.

Conclusion

As Health and Social Care Organisations we are constantly providing information in many formats, from websites to information leaflets. We have a legal duty to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people, it is vital therefore that when producing information consideration is given to the positive portrayal of people with disabilities.

For further advice and information contact the Equality Unit:

Email: equality.unit@hscni.net
Telephone: 028 9536 3961

Any request for the document in another format or language will be considered. Contact details above.

References

Office for Disabilities Issues inclusive communications website:
http://odi.dwp.gov.uk/inclusive-communications/index.php

International labour Organisation- Media Guidelines for the Portrayal of Disability:
http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@ifp_skills/documents/publication/wcms_127002.pdf