

Mental health a human right

By Terra Johnston PhD(c)

December 3rd marks International Day of Persons with Disabilities, an event that has been celebrated annually around the world since 1992. Importantly, this event calls attention to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, an international treaty which Canada signed in 2010. The purpose of the convention is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.

It could be said that throughout history, society has viewed persons with disabilities through a lens of sympathy rather than one of human rights. The convention addresses societal attitudes toward persons with disabilities by affirming the inherent right of all individuals to live life to their fullest potential, whatever that may be.

True, Canada has laws that protect the rights of persons with disabilities (e.g., the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms), however, the convention provides an important mechanism through which to monitor action taken to uphold these laws. The convention applies to all levels of government, so every province and territory in Canada, as well as the federal government, must develop and carry out policies, laws and measures to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities. Moreover, Canada must report to a United Nations monitoring committee on the progress that has been made on each of the Articles found within the convention. Holding our governments accountable to the convention is integral to protecting the rights of persons with disabilities.

At the Canadian Mental Health Association for Manitoba, we believe the convention provides a strong and clear roadmap for moving Canada toward full accessibility and inclusion. Understanding the convention and the duty of our federal and provincial governments to implement the convention is key to protecting the rights of every Canadian.

Importantly, the convention recognizes that persons with disabilities includes individuals who live with mental illness and, who, because of that illness, face accessibility barriers that hinder their full participation in society. The convention defines accessibility to include full access to the physical, social, economic and cultural environment; to health

and education services; and to information and communication. Under this definition, people living with mental illness have the right to full participation in all aspects of life within their communities.

Sadly, however, this is not the reality for many people who live with mental illness. All too often, they struggle with multiple barriers that impact many aspects of their life, including housing, employment, education, income security, relationships and social participation.

Of these barriers, a key concern relates to accessible health services. As outlined in Article 25, the convention calls for fair and timely access to health services and early interventions that minimize and prevent further disabilities. As such, this Article provides an important consideration for how we deliver mental healthcare in our province. Currently in Manitoba, there is a significant lack of mental healthcare services to meet the current need. Individuals, including children, who attempt to access mental healthcare services for an emerging mental health problem face enormous wait lists (e.g., six months and greater). And, while waiting for services, their mental health problem will often deteriorate into a state of crisis and chronic mental illness.

A mental healthcare system that fails to intervene early and prevent or minimize mental health problems does not uphold the convention and the rights of persons with disabilities. Such failure begs our attention. We must stand together to protect the full rights of every person, including people living with mental illness. Understanding the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and celebrating its significance on December 3rd is a good place to start.

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