Toward a Social Model of Disability

People with disabilities have been represented in many different ways over the years—as special, as holy, and as sub-human to name a few. Clearly, many of these representations have been less than respectful, useful, and positive. Representations that become firmly established and are used to understand, think and talk about something are sometimes referred to as models. Recently, people with disabilities have found a new way of understanding disability. This model is often called the social or rights-based model of disability. It is a more dignified, helpful, and thoughtful model than those that have been used in the past. Many people with disabilities hope that this model will replace two models—the charity model and the medical model—that have been used in society for decades and continue to be dominant models used in the media and in many other American institutions.

The Charity Model

In the charity model of disability, the individual is seen as needy and even pitiful. This model is well known by those who are familiar with telethons that parade children with disabilities across the stage while interviewing crying parents. In this model, people with disabilities are portrayed as "broken" or as sick. The assumption is that all people with disabilities want to be fixed and cured.

The charity model leads people to believe that those with disabilities are not contributing members of society. This perception can cause discrimination and arouse prejudice. In addition, receiving charity is stigmatizing; benevolence carries with it an expectation of gratitude. This is problematic as people with disabilities should not need to express gratitude for rights to which they are entitled.

The Medical Model

In the medical model, the focus is on the person's disability, rather than on the needs of the person. In this model of disability, the lives of people with disabilities are defined by a label or diagnosis and it is the individual, and not society, who has the problem and needs to be repaired. In other words, the medical model views disability as something that "belongs" to a

person; the society does not need to change—the individual with the disability does. The medical model also assumes that the ultimate solution is to find a cure or to help people with disabilities lead "normal" lives.

The Social or Rights-Based Model

In recent years, people with disabilities have advocated a different way of looking at disability, which they call the rights-based or social model. Central to these models is the belief that individuals with disabilities have a right to access, belong to, contribute to, and to be valued in their local community. This model focuses on the strengths, abilities, and experiences of people with disabilities. Supporting individuals with disabilities in this model does not mean helping them to become "normal," but instead focuses on tackling the social or physical barriers the individual faces in daily living.

In contrast to the medical and charity models of disability, the social model is based on knowledge of the experiences, views, and practices of people with disabilities. The model understands individuals with disabilities as experts on their own lives and as experts on disability; it does not necessarily see difference as problematic or necessarily negative.

From the perspective of the social model, people with disabilities have faced prejudice and discrimination. Therefore, many who subscribe to this orientation believe that attention should be paid to restructuring society, not treating the individual.

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