

# Models of Disability

The Medical and Social Models of disability are different ways of approaching how we think about and act towards disabled people. The dominant idea is that disabled people have "impairments" or medical problems that need to be cured if possible (medical model). Disabled people have challenged this approach and describe "disability" not as a medical issue but as one where disabled people face daily barriers in society, for example, in the way we design and build our towns and cities, the way we organise our social activities and in the attitudes that we perpetuate, which favour non-disabled people over disabled people (social model).

## The Medical Model of Disability

Under this model of disability, disabled people's inability to join in society is seen as a direct result of having an impairment and not as the result of features of our society which can be changed.

When people such as policy makers and managers think about disability in this way they tend to concentrate their efforts on 'compensating' people with impairments for what is 'wrong' with their bodies by targeting 'special' welfare benefits at them and providing segregated 'special' services for them and so on.

The medical model of disability also affects the way disabled people think about themselves. Many disabled people internalise the negative message that all disabled people's problems stem from not having 'normal' bodies. Disabled people too can be led to believe that their impairments automatically prevent them from participating in social activities.

This internalised oppression can make disabled people less likely to challenge their exclusion from mainstream society.

The following extract is taken from The Disability Rights Commission website:

"People influenced by the Medical Model see disabled people as pitiful, tragic and needing medical treatment. If a cure is impossible, then they believe society ought to care for disabled people, generally in residential institutions and hospitals. This way of thinking is criticised for disempowering disabled people. They are seen as "the problem", having problems and experts are seen as in the best position to determine whether they live or die, have treatment or not and how and where they spend their lives.

This ideology pervades most societies and is evident in the way we think about disabled people, behave toward them and how we fail to allow them access to education, leisure, work and relationships."

## The Social Model of Disability

The social model has been worked out by disabled people who feel that the individual model does not provide an adequate explanation for their exclusion from mainstream society. This is because their experiences have shown them that most of their problems are not caused by their impairments, but by the way society is organised.

Disability is shown as being caused by 'barriers' or elements of social organisation which take no or little account of people who have impairments. Society is shown to disable people who have impairments because the way it has been set up prevents disabled people from taking part in every day life. It follows that if disabled people are to be able to join in mainstream society, the way society is organised must be changed. Removing the barriers that exclude (disabled) people who have impairments can bring about this change.

### Examples of how society could change to allow disabled people to participate equally:

Medical model problem	Social model solution
Painful hands, unable to open jars, doors	Better designed lids, automatic doors
Difficulties in standing for long periods	More seats in public places
Unable to climb steps into buildings	Ramps and lifts in all buildings
Other people won't give you a job because they think you couldn't do it	Educate people to look at disabled people's abilities rather than looking for problems

The following extract is taken from The Disability Rights Commission website:

"People who are influenced by the Social Model believe disabled people face discrimination daily. Their skills and attributes are overlooked, their potential is limited by prejudice and they are excluded by society.

The Social Model identifies the barriers, behaviours and attitudes that cause problems for disabled people. Disabled people are empowered by the Social Model because it helps them to recognise and overcome the barriers of society."