



## We Are All Disabled

Canada Day came with its many news stories serving up traditional holiday fare – explorations of “who we are” as a nation. Perhaps the biggest continuing trend: Canadians are an increasingly diverse people of mixed race.

But there is more to Canada than the changing shades of skin. We are also a nation green with trees, grey with age and rainbowed with pride. Add to the mix the federal election campaign trying to paint us blue, orange or red come October.

We are clearly a country of many colours. But perhaps these multiple hues are blinding us from other dimensions of who we are.

The fact is we are all disabled – or likely will be at some point in our lives.

Now this may seem an odd conclusion. The Canadian Survey on Disability reports only 14 percent of Canadians have a disabling condition. But we need to look more closely at the information being captured here.

Disability is an impairment in mental, neurological, motor, sensory or expressive function. The impairment often has an effect on movement, communication or thought.

The *potential* for disability in the Canadian population is far greater than the survey snapshot, which illustrates a point in time. There are two main drivers that will change the national story.

First, Canada is aging rapidly with one-quarter of the population expected to be over age 65 by the year 2030. While seniors are healthier and living longer than before, the incidence of disability rises with age. Ten percent of working-age individuals have some form of disability compared to 33 percent of Canadians aged 65 and older, with 40 the average age of onset.

This figure does not mean that all older Canadians will be unable to participate in society. But it does mean that we will see a substantial rise in various forms of impairment as the population greys. Widespread dementia has been identified as a potential public health threat.

A second factor is the rapidly rising incidence of chronic disease. The Public Health Agency of Canada estimates that chronic disease rates are increasing at a whopping 14 percent per year. Three in five Canadians age 20 or older have a chronic disease and four out of five are at risk. In 2000, six major chronic diseases (cardio-vascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, cancer, mental illness, digestive diseases and musculoskeletal diseases) represented \$31 billion in direct health care costs and \$64 billion in indirect costs related to lost productivity.

When 80 percent of adult Canadians are at risk of experiencing one or more chronic health conditions, the national story on disability needs to be rewritten. We no longer are talking about the possibility – but rather the *likelihood* – of disability over a lifetime. Most Canadians will face physical and/or mental impairment at some point or will have at least one family member coping with these circumstances.

Coincidentally, another “who we are” story appeared on July 1. The *Globe and Mail* published the obituary of Canadian disability activist Judith Snow. Judith disliked the word disability, arguing that all Canadians have some limitation. It is just a matter of degree. Vanier Institute of the Family CEO Nora Spinks contends that the term “diverse-ability” should replace “disability” to reflect this reality.

This is more than a question of semantics. If we understood disability as a population issue rather than the condition of

a designated group, the policy responses would be profoundly different.

We would design homes, workplaces and communities without multiple barriers. We would make widely available to the entire population technical aids, equipment and services that are now haphazardly and scantily provided. Most important, we would drop the attitudinal barriers that separate “us” from “them.”

As we consider who we are as Canadians, it is essential not just to count numbers within various groupings. We have to ask deeper questions about the nature and purpose of these categories. We need to understand that disability is a continuum of impairment with some people having multiple conditions or simply a more severe form of limitation than others currently or will have.

Oh Canada, we are a nation strong,  
free and ideally accessible for all.

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