

Woman with the White Moustache

I recently had to undergo minor surgery that involved a repair to my upper right lip. The procedure itself was a short operation that required local freezing, followed by a cut and stitch. Short and sweet – other than the pay-it-yourself big bill.

I walked away from the 10-minute session with no telltale evidence of the event that had just transpired – other than a bright white sterile band-aid applied to the spot in question. I was instructed to leave it in place for five days. That was the beginning and end of the story – so I thought.

The main side-effect from the whole incident was a stiff upper lip. Good thing. Little did I know when I walked out the door how much of a stiff upper lip I actually would need. What began as a minor surgical procedure quickly became an emotional trauma. The little white moustache turned into an eye-opening shock.

Virtually every passerby on the street fixated on that bandage as though they had never seen anything like it in their lives. One concierge in an apartment building helpfully informed me that I had forgotten to remove some ice cream from my lip and pointed to the offending area.

Another woman in a public washroom glared so long and hard at the ‘spot’ that I asked whether I could answer any questions about her fixation.

By the end of day three, the emotional exhaustion of literally hundreds of gawkers had become so intense that I decided to stay home and out of sight for the remaining two days of the five-day requirement. (I actually called the doctor and asked whether the band-aid could come off sooner because I was having trouble keeping it on. Truth be told: I wanted it off.)

Suddenly, my personal world was touching my professional life. For years, I have done research and writing on issues affecting the lives of persons with disabilities. For decades, I have been committed to policy changes that improve the quality of life for persons with any form of disabling condition. Ever since acting as research adviser to the Parliamentary Committee on the Disabled and the Handicapped during the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981, I have come to understand that disability issues represent one of the most complex areas of social policy.

But I never had personally experienced what it is like to be – or at least be seen as – different.

It may seem absurd to compare a minor surgical procedure that had virtually no side-effects or disabling consequences to the life experience of persons with disabilities. It feels wrong to be doing this. At the same time, I thought it was actually important to tell the story.

If my little white strip of band-aid appeared repulsive to most, I cannot possibly imagine what it must be like for persons with permanent facial disfigurement from accident or injury, a disabling condition that affects limbs and limbs, or any obvious disability that makes an individual even slightly different from the so-called ‘norm.’

In response to the social exclusion typically experienced by persons with disabilities, the Caledon Institute has produced numerous papers on the need for physical and procedural accommodation. To help counter lower rates of educational attainment, we have proposed various forms of assistance to ensure that students with disabilities have access to opportunities for post-secondary educational studies.

We have also written extensively about the wide range of possible income security reforms to tackle the disproportionately high rates of poverty experienced by persons with disabilities. We have proposed a national plan of disability supports to ensure that all persons with disabilities have access to essential equipment and services not only to participate

in society but also (in many cases) to physically survive.

Unfortunately, there is no policy solution to avert the anguish from shocked stares and gasping gawkers – other than to tell the tale of what it was like to be subjected continually to these responses (if only for three days). There clearly is a need to raise awareness about the impact of these all-too-typical responses upon the lives of persons with disabilities – especially their feelings of worth as a person.

For me, the little white moustache has assumed new importance. It has become a big red flag as I reflect on this recent experience. Substantial and varied policy changes are required to help move the ground from exclusion to acceptance. Equally important is a social environment that not only tolerates but also accepts difference.

The little white moustache is a stark reminder of how much work remains to be done in terms of attitudinal shifts regarding persons with disabilities. A no-stare zone would be a good place to start.

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