



‘Words Matter’

A Guide for Journalists

Physical Disability Council of NSW Inc.



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For more information, or if you have any suggestions, contact:

Lachlan Hazelton, Media Officer

Physical Disability Council of NSW

3/184 Glebe Point Road

Glebe NSW 2037

Phone (02) 9552 1606

Fax (02) 9552 4644

Email lachlan.hazelton@pdcnsw.org.au

Web <http://www.pdcnsw.org.au>



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Message from our President

We've called this publication 'Words Matter'.

Words do matter. They are powerful tools. Their power wounds and discourages, their power can also increase understanding and communications within society. Appropriate descriptive language and the avoidance of stereotypes will foster positive social change.

The words used in any society indicate the attitudes of a large number of the people in that society. The words often used in our society about issues such as disability reflect the historical, rather than the current reality of the society.

The way in which people with disabilities are represented in the media impacts on the social process essential to achieving equality of citizenship.

Some people may view the need to be presented appropriately as 'political correctness' however, people with disabilities should have the right to be presented in a manner of their choosing. Enabling this choice is a responsibility and a significant challenge.

Just like many others in the community, there are people with disabilities have great stories to tell. Very often the stories will have little if anything to do with their disability. So, we hope this booklet equips and encourages journalists to take a truly inclusive approach to their work, which we look forward to reading.

The authors of this booklet are writers and journalists who have disabilities. The Physical Disability Council of NSW has also sought and integrated the advice of industry professionals and experts in ethics in the development of this resource.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who has assisted with the production of *Words Matter*, particularly the working journalists and academics.

Ann-Mason Furmage
President,
Physical Disability Council of NSW Inc.

3rd December 2006.



Introduction

The power of words and images to reflect and shape community perceptions of people with a disability is widely acknowledged. This moulding of perceptions and attitudes through language and images is an ongoing and dynamic process. It represents an important responsibility and a significant challenge to all involved – particularly those who engage in developing public communications: our journalists, reporters, photographers and camera-operators.

This is a challenge of credibility. If an article makes strong, valid points, but is not credible to the audience, effectiveness is lost. This is especially true of issues and subjects that relate to disability.

The language guidance in this document is particular to the Australian experience.

Disability issues are newsworthy – why not cover them?

According to the 2001 census, at least 20% of the population (or more than four million Australian people) said they had some form of disability. As the community ages, disabilities and disability issues will become increasingly relevant and newsworthy, but there are some critical points to keep in mind;

- ▶ Every person with a disability is individually **different** from the next.
- ▶ Assumptions about disability will result in **inaccurate and erroneous reporting**.
- ▶ **Many people have hidden or invisible disabilities** such as a psychiatric or learning disability, hearing impairment, or some degree of vision impairment.
- ▶ People living with a disability have rarely been depicted in literature, films or photographs as ordinary people. Living with a disability is simply living a life. Disability is not something to fear, ridicule or denigrate.
- ▶ **Stereotypical depictions** of people living with a disability **stigmatise** and **demean** real people. Promote the “people first” concept. Depictions of people with a disability should be in the same multi-dimensional fashion as anyone else.
- ▶ People with disability are people first, with feelings, emotions, desires, aspirations, frustration and needs just like anyone else.

Use/ing the social power of Language

Social power affects community attitudes. Community attitudes have significant impact on people living with a disability.

Appropriate language brings about a shift in social emphasis.

For example –

Using **person with a disability** instead of ‘disabled person’ moves the focus from the disability to the individual.

Appropriate language positions a person living with a disability in an active role rather than a passive one.

For example –

Wheelchair user contributes to the concept of an active, independent person` rather than *'wheelchair bound'*, which conjures up passivity.

The term *handicap* is only useful when referring to the environment. People with a disability are/can be more *handicapped* by the environment and the physical barriers, than by the disability itself.

For example –

The lack of an accessible toilet *handicaps* employees who use wheelchairs.

Put the Person first

Keep your emphasis on the person first, without denying or obscuring the reality of the disability.

Disability has replaced *'handicap'* as the more appropriate term.

For example –

Use phrases “has a disability” or “living with a disability”.

Research Disability Issues

There are a number of significant issues important to people living with disability.

For example –

Some issues of concern include the lack of physical access to public facilities; transport and schools; access to equipment; education and employment; development of the worldwide disability rights movement; human rights; treatment and attitudes to people with a disability.

Be inclusive

People with a disability drive, vote, and work, use childcare and juggle the full range of demands like other Australian adults in society. Report the views of people with a disability in general interest issues such as child care, public transport, the environment.

For example –

Report disability sports as you would any other sport. Drop the ‘super-crip’ stories – they are patronising and put impossible standards on other people with disabilities.

Target the whole Community.

Despite a market of over four million people with a disability, Australian advertisers ignore them. That’s right Advertising copywriters forget 20% of the Australian audience.

People with disabilities in Australia also buy detergent, ice cream cones, shampoo, underwear, cars, sanitary napkins and condoms! But you would

never know it watching our TV or reading the ads in our newspapers and magazines. To much of the Media, People with disabilities in Australia might as well be invisible.

Ask relevant questions

People with a disability are matter-of-fact about their disabilities. Intrusive personal questions, for example about a person's sex life, are offensive and sensational. Be matter-of-fact in interviews or reporting.

Be honest about the story angle

Report details relevant to your story angle. Information about a person's medical history is unjustified. Avoid gratuitously emphasising physical differences or adaptive aids and technologies in visual or written treatments unless this is relevant to the story or the crux of the story.

For example –

If a report is about neighbourhood environmental pollution, and the principle interviewee is a person using a wheelchair, the visual focus should be the person, not the wheelchair.

Always ask

Never assume how an individual feels about having a disability. Even if you know someone with a similar condition, chances are, your interviewee does not think or feel the same way. It is always safer to ask how he or she feels if this is relevant to the story.



Myths & Facts

Most myths are stereotypes. **Stereotypes discriminate** because they *oversimplify* qualities, which have only a passing acquaintance with the truth.

Myth	Fact
Disability is a monumental tragedy	Disability is a part of everyday life.
People with a disability who are married and have children are extraordinary.	People with a disability are everywhere in society.
People with a disability lead boring, uneventful lives.	People with a disability who are married and have children are like any other people who are married and have children.
Families, particularly spouses of people with a disability, are exceptionally heroic for living with a fate worse than death.	People with a disability lead lives, like anyone else in society.
People with a disability are asexual.	Families, particularly spouses of people with a disability, are living with a loved one like anyone else in the community.
People with a disability are something to be ashamed of.	People with a disability are sexual beings like anyone else.
People with disabilities who excel are super heroes.	People with a disability are like any other human being in society.
People with disabilities succeed <i>in spite of</i> their disability.	People with disabilities who excel are like any other excelling human being in society.
Positive portrayal of people with a disability involves presenting us as individuals with a variety of qualities.	People with disabilities succeed, sometimes, because of their disability.
Disability should not be hidden, ignored or over emphasised. Unless your subject is specifically one built around a disability issue, a person's disability should not be a focus of the story.	
Be sure you have not implied that people with a disability are to be feared, ignored, or glorified nor somehow more courageous, special or heroic.	



Use of Photographs

Photographs **always** send a message. Photographs are meant to support the text of the story or the issue reported.

When a person with a disability is photographed, more often than not, the focus falls on their disability or their equipment. This kind of photograph might inadvertently **devalue the person** by using inappropriate perspectives or settings.

If the disability is not relevant to the story, the photographer should consider taking their shots in ways which ignore the disabilities of their subject.

Coverage of people with a disability can often be long on emotion and inspiration, but short on the issues. This **demeans the person** as well as the story.



Reporting Fairly

In many contexts it is unnecessary to refer to a person's disability. Yet this aspect of a person is frequently referred to in news items.

When a person with a disability is featured in a story that has several possible angles, the human interest story line usually predominates, (i.e. how the individual has overcome overwhelming odds). The focus of the story becomes **skewed towards the disability** rather than the person or the real issues.

- ▶ Gratuitous emphasis of disability results in the exclusion of other characteristics. This creates the impression that the person referred to is somehow **an oddity** - not quite an equal member of the community.

**Derogatory labelling demeans and dehumanises
people with disabilities.**

- ▶ People living with a disability are part of society – with a variety of desires, interests, problems talents and faults **like anyone else**.

**Aim to write realistic, respectful copy
about people living with a disability.**

- ▶ One of the hardest worked clichés is of someone succeeding “in spite of” their disability. People often succeed **because of the lessons their disability has taught them**, not in spite of their disability. Mostly they just succeed like anyone else.

**Avoid portraying the experience of people with a disability
as sensational or abnormal.**

Reporting about people with disability fairly means –

- ▶ reporting a realistic, ongoing response to life's daily challenges **not a focus on the trauma of personal suffering**;
- ▶ reporting the adequacy or inadequacy of societies' response **not milking the emotive content of disability**;
- ▶ reporting common human interest issues **not excessive emotional coverage**;
- ▶ Clear, honest reporting of relevant information.



Interviews

When you interview a person with a disability, conduct the interview as you would with anyone else.

Keep your questions relevant to the issues or story you are pursuing, as you would with anyone else.

Consider the person's disability as you would their hair colour or education level. If it's relevant to your story include it. If it's irrelevant to the story, leave it out.

Asking a person with a disability 'were you born like that?' or 'what happened to you?' can be invasive, especially if there is no logical reason to write about it or even to ask about it.

Before asking a question about an individual's personal life, consider whether you would put a similar question to **any other interviewee**. Questions about a person's disability must be relevant to the story to be newsworthy.

If you think a person with a disability needs help or if you offer assistance, wait until your offer has been accepted before you help. It is **always** advisable to ask the person **how** they require your assistance.

Tips when interviewing – Dos

- ▶ **Sit at the same level** as the person being interviewed
- ▶ Most importantly, relax when interviewing a person with a disability.
- ▶ Ask yourself, would this be a story if the person had no disability?
- ▶ Focus on the barriers to people with disabilities, like inaccessible housing and transport and lack of personal care services and the barriers to education and jobs.
- ▶ Remember to talk to a person with a disability about people with disabilities if you can.
- ▶ If in doubt, **ask**. Discuss any issues that you have and don't be afraid to ask relevant questions.
- ▶ Common expressions such as "...see you later" or "have you heard about..." are acceptable to vision impaired and hearing-impaired people and generally cause no offence.
- ▶ Be patient and persevere.

Tips when interviewing – Don'ts

- ▶ Never talk to a person with a disability through a companion, personal assistant or their interpreter. Treat adults as adults. Talk to them.
- ▶ Avoid making assumptions about disability or the implications of a disability. Ask the Interviewee.
- ▶ Don't concentrate on any medical perspective. There may not be one.
- ▶ Don't focus on the human interest story of someone who is experiencing a disability (i.e. how the person has overcome overwhelming odds). Keep the focus of the story on the issues rather than the disability.
- ▶ Don't assume someone is ill simply because she or he has a disability.
- ▶ Don't feel embarrassed or guilty if you have difficulty understanding the person you are interviewing. The person will probably be used to it and will have developed ways of managing. Tell them you're having trouble.
- ▶ Don't call people with a disability *brave* or *amazing* for doing things that other people do all day everyday.



Fast Facts

• Who is the Physical Disability Council of NSW?

The Physical Disability Council of NSW Inc (PDCN) is the peak body in NSW representing people with physical disability across the state. The overall purpose of PDCN is to provide a state-wide voice for people with a physical disability living in NSW.

The aim of the Council is to assist and support people with physical disability in NSW achieve equality of citizenship and full participation.

PDCN formed in late 1994 and received seed funding in 1995 through the NSW Government's Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care.

PDCN members live in all parts of NSW and participate in networks to build better links between people with a physical disability, their families and organisations.

Whenever there are discussions involving service providers, decision makers in government, the communities in which we live or in business, we believe there should be "nothing about us without us."

• Disability in Australia

- ▶ 20% of Australians have a disability.
- ▶ 15% of Australians of working age have a disability.
- ▶ 3.2 million People say they are restricted in carrying out one or more daily activities, such as self care, mobility and communication.
- ▶ 88% of disabilities are invisible.
- ▶ People with disabilities have disposable income of \$26 billion per annum.

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004)

• Disability Defined

Disability is a normal part of the human experience and people with disabilities are members of the Australian community. The Australian Bureau of Statistics figures indicate more than four million people in Australia, have one or more disabilities; and this proportion is increasing, given our ageing population.

There are many different kinds of disability and a wide variety of situations people experience.

- ▶ The disability may be permanent or temporary.
- ▶ It may exist from birth or be acquired later in life.
- ▶ A person may have one disability or a number of disabilities.
- ▶ A person may be treated as having a disability when in fact they do not.

- ▶ A person's disability may be apparent, such as loss of a limb; or hidden, such as epilepsy, hearing impairment or a mental illness.
- ▶ Disability may be more or less severe in its impact depending on a number of different factors.
- ▶ People with the same disability are as likely as anyone else to have different abilities.

Physical disability pertains to total or partial loss of a person's bodily functions (i.e. walking, gross motor skills, bladder control etc) and total or partial loss of a part of the body (i.e. a person with an amputation).

Examples of physical disability include: those which are Impairment based such as;

- ▶ Amputation;
- ▶ Post-polio Syndrome;
- ▶ Arthritis;
- ▶ Cerebral Palsy;
- ▶ Multiple-Sclerosis
- ▶ Muscular dystrophy.
- ▶ Acquired Brain Injury
- ▶ Spina Bifida
- ▶ Stroke
- ▶ Spinal Cord Injuries

And disabilities such as;

- ▶ paraplegia;
- ▶ quadriplegia
- ▶ hemiplegia
- ▶ diplegia

- **World Health Organisation (WHO) developed the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) in 2002.**

<http://www.who.int/>

“**The medical model** views disability as a feature of the person, directly caused by disease, trauma or other health condition, which requires medical care provided in the form of individual treatment by professionals. Disability, on this model, calls for medical or other treatment or intervention, to 'correct' the problem with the individual.

The social model of disability, on the other hand, sees disability as a socially created problem and not at all an attribute of an individual. In the social model, disability demands a political response, since the problem is created by an unaccommodating physical environment brought about by attitudes and other features of the social environment.” (WHO, 2002)

PDCN supports the social model rather than the marginalising medical one.

• **United Nations (UN) Office of the high commissioner for Human Rights proclaimed the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons in 1975.**

“1. The term "disabled person" means any person unable to ensure by himself or herself, wholly or partly, the necessities of a normal individual and/or social life, as a result of deficiency, either congenital or not, in his or her physical or mental capabilities.”

“3. Disabled persons have the inherent right to respect for their human dignity. Disabled persons, whatever the origin, nature and seriousness of their handicaps and disabilities, have the same fundamental rights as their fellow-citizens of the same age, which implies first and foremost the right to enjoy a decent life, as normal and full as possible.”

The United Nations seeks a broad and inclusive approach to accessing society on equal terms.

“Disabled persons are entitled to the measures designed to enable them to become as self-reliant as possible.” (*Article 5*)

• **The Australian Federal Government enacted the Disability Discrimination Act in 1992.**

http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/dda1992264/

“The definition of disability under the Act is very broad to encompass physical, sensory, mental and intellectual disability. Disability, in relation to a person, means:

- (a) total or partial loss of the person’s bodily or mental functions; or
- (b) total or partial loss of a part of the body; or
- (c) the presence in the body of organisms causing disease or illness; or
- (d) the presence in the body of organisms capable of causing disease or illness; or
- (e) the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of the person’s body; or
- (f) a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction; or
- (g) a disorder, illness or disease that affects a person’s thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgment or that results in disturbed behaviour;

And includes a disability that:

- (h) presently exists; or
- (i) previously existed but no longer exists; or
- (j) may exist in the future; or
- (k) is imputed to a person”

How Disability is viewed depends on YOU

When you are writing about disability issues or portraying people with a disability on television or in print, or simply talking to a person with a disability, keep in mind people with a disability are **your equals**. Respect their individuality and rights. Relate to a person with a disability the same way you would prefer to be treated.

Participation in society is limited only by access to society

Portrayals of people with disabilities influence how they are regarded by their community. Media policy makers and journalists have a valuable and direct line to the public.

The media can take leadership in effecting a positive and equal portrayal of people with disabilities. At heart, disability is a social issue for the entire Australia community.

The **medical model** focuses on disability, identifying them as 'victims' unable to participate fully in society. The **social model** views a disability as a set of circumstances which in some way hampers or hinders a person in terms of their ability to carry out day to day activities.

This social model considers access to society to be at the crux of social participation. A disability is not a limitation in itself. Rather, participation in society is an issue of design and modification to permit people with disabilities complete access to buildings (old and new), recreation, education and health facilities like any other member of society.



Excerpts

Terms used by the media will have more positive and lasting impact when people with disabilities are approached as part of the target audience, not outside of it.

Below are examples of current 'usage' which highlight the differences in approach.

✗ “<Business Name> angers disabled” [media headline]

This example uses the medical model, focusing on disability and risks dehumanising people with a disability and isolating them. This approach needs *to be corrected*.

✓ “<Business Name> angers people with disabilities”

This phrase would have been preferred. It positions people with a disability as part of the society around them, and more in keeping with the social model.

✗ “Disabled passengers”

This phrase is isolationist and puts disability ahead of the person, in fact without mentioning *people* at all.

✓ Passengers with disabilities

This phrasing is inclusive and effective in positioning the individuals as part of a larger and worthwhile group (passengers).

✗ “New support for disabled children” [media headline]]

This phrase again isolates the children as a particular group taking a medical model – *an approach to be corrected*.

✓ “children with disabilities”

From the same article, this phrase uses an inclusive social model point of view and could have being used in the headline as well, if for no other reason than consistency.

✗ Disabled 'need help to keep jobs'. [media headline]

This phrasing is isolationist and dehumanises the individuals seeking employment. It focuses attention on the disability ahead of the person.

✓ people with disabilities

Found in the same article, this phrasing takes an inclusive social approach, putting the people first and could have being used in the headline as well, if for no other reason than consistency.

✓ **Airline to wheelchair users: pay a carer.** [media headline]

This phrasing is inclusive, drawing attention to the fact the individuals only use a wheelchair rather than being 'bound' to it.

✗ **Disabled passengers**

Unfortunately, this phrase is in the body of the same article and undermines the social consistency of the earlier phrases. It isolates readers who have a disability.

✓ **Passengers with disabilities**

This phrase is an inclusive approach, effective at putting the person first as part of a larger and worthwhile group (passengers).

✗ **Disabled travellers**

Similar to the example 'disabled passengers' (see above).

✓ **Travellers with disabilities**

This phrase takes an inclusive approach, effective at putting the person first as part of a larger and worthwhile group (passengers).

✗ **Tighter rules on the disabled**

This phrase dehumanises people with disabilities to the point of viewing them as animals or errant children.

✗ **Disabled athletes**

Similar to the example 'Disabled passengers' (see above).

✓ **Athletes with disability/ies**

This phrase is an inclusive approach, respecting the dedication and training and ability of athletes. It is effective in placing the individuals first as part of a larger and worthwhile group (athletes).



Know Your Terms Table

Below are some possible alternative phrases, which would include rather than exclude a broader cross section of potential readers.

<i>Disabled, Crippled, Handicapped, Invalid</i>	✗	People/ Person with disability	✓
<i>Suffers from, victim of...</i>	✗	Person with... people with.... person living with....	✓
<i>Non-disabled</i>	✗	Person without disability Able-bodied	✓
Wheelchair-bound confined to a wheelchair 'in a wheelchair'	✗	<i>Wheelchair user</i>	✓
<i>Dwarf, midget</i>	✗	Short stature short statured person 'little people'	✓
<i>A special needs individual</i>	✗	A person with a disability	✓
<i>Spastic</i>	✗	Has cerebral palsy	✓
<i>Victim</i>	✗	No replacement for this term. <i>People with a disability are not victims and must not be portrayed as such.</i>	✓
<i>The Disabled</i>	✗	People with disabilities	✓
<i>Defective, deformed</i>	✗	Avoid these degrading terms	✓
<i>The Handicapped</i>	✗	Person with <specific disability>	✓
<i>Epileptic</i>	✗	Person with epilepsy	✓
<i>Fit, attack, spell</i>	✗	Seizure	✓
<i>The deaf</i>	✗	Person who is deaf	✓
<i>Deaf and Dumb</i>	✗	Unable to speak	✓
<i>Blind/ Visually impaired</i>	✗	Person with vision impairment.	✓
<i>Insane, lunatic, psycho</i>	✗	Person with psychiatric disability or a mental illness <or the specific illness>	✓

		condition>	
<i>retarded</i>	✘	Person with an intellectual disability	✓
<i>Mongol</i>	✘	Person with (has) Down Syndrome	✓

* This table has been adapted from
Hacked Off – Disability Now & National Union of Journalists (UK)



Resources, Sources and References

Key Organisations

The Physical Disability Council of Australia – (PDCA)

<http://www.pdca.org.au/>

PDCA is the national peak organisation representing the interests and views of all people with a physical disability, founded by people with physical disabilities, and managed by people with physical disabilities.

The Physical Disability Council of NSW – (PDCN)

<http://www.pdcnsw.org.au/>

PDCN is the NSW peak organisation representing the interests and views of all people with a physical disability, founded by people with physical disabilities, and managed by people with physical disabilities.

People With Disability (PWD) Australia

<http://www.pwd.org.au/>

PWD a national peak disability rights and advocacy organisation made up of people with disability and organisations primarily constituted by people with disability.

Brain Injury Association (NSW)

<http://www.biansw.org.au/>

BIAN is the leading advocacy body in NSW for people with an acquired brain injury, their families, carers and interested organisations.

Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association (NSW)

<http://www.mdaa.org.au/>

MDAA is the peak advocacy body for people from a non-English speaking background (NESB) with disability and their families and carers in NSW.

Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission

http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disability_rights/index.html

Resources

Hacked Off – Disability Now & National Union of Journalists (UK)

<http://www.disabilitynow.org.uk/campaigns/hackedoff/index.htm>

Diversity@work

<http://diversityatwork.com.au/>

Way With Words (QLD)

<http://www.disability.qld.gov.au/publications/waywithwords.pdf>

Disability is Natural

<http://www.disabilityisnatural.com/peoplefirstlanguage.htm>

Government Services

Department of Aging, Disability and Home Care (NSW)

<http://www.dadhc.nsw.gov.au/>

Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (ACT)

<http://www.dhcs.act.gov.au/>

The Disability Information & Resource Centre (SA)

<http://www.dircsa.org.au/>

Department of Human Services (VIC)

<http://hnp.dhs.vic.gov.au/>

Disability Services Commission (WA)

<http://www.dsc.wa.gov.au/>

Government Department of Health and Community Services (NT)

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