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Disability Equality Centre

Guidelines for writing about disabled people.

The following information is to help make better choices in terms of language and portrayal. The 'Guidelines for Reporting and Writing about People with Disabilities' (Research and Training Centre/Independent Living, University of Kansas, USE, 1996, 5th Edition) explain preferred terminology and offer suggestions for appropriate ways to describe disabled people. They reflect input from many disability organisations and have been reviewed and endorsed by media and disability experts. Although opinions may differ on some terms, this guidance is representative of the current consensus among disability organisations and portions have been adopted into the "Associated Press Stylebook", a basic reference for professional journalists.

Please consider the following when writing about disabled people :

- **Do not focus on disability** unless it is crucial to a story. Avoid tear-jerking human interest stories about incurable diseases, congenital impairments, or severe injury. Focus instead on issues that affect the quality of life for those same individuals, such as accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, employment opportunities and discrimination.
- **Do not portray successful disabled people as superhuman.** Even though the public may admire super-achievers, portraying disabled people as superstars raises false expectations that all disabled people should achieve this level.
- **Do not sensationalise a disability** by saying 'afflicted with', 'crippled with', 'suffers from', 'victim of', and so on. Instead, say 'person who has multiple sclerosis' or 'man who had polio'.



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- **Do not use generic labels** for disability groups, such as ‘the retarded’, ‘the deaf’, ‘the blind’, or even ‘the disabled’. Emphasise **people**, not labels. Say ‘people with mental health problems/difficulties’ or ‘people who are deaf’ or ‘blind or visually impaired people’ or ‘disabled people’.
- **Put people first** not their disability. Say ‘woman with arthritis’, ‘children who are deaf’, ‘disabled people’. This puts the focus on the individual, not the particular functional limitation. Because of editorial pressures to be succinct, it may not always be possible to put people first. If the portrayal is positive and accurate, consider the following variations: ‘non-disabled people’, ‘wheelchair user’, ‘deaf girl’, ‘paralysed child’, and so on.

‘Crippled’, ‘deformed’, ‘suffers from’, ‘victim of’, ‘the retarded’, ‘infirm’, ‘the deaf and dumb’, etc. are never acceptable under any circumstances.

- **Emphasize abilities** not limitations. For example: ‘uses a wheelchair/braces’, ‘walks with crutches’, rather than ‘confined to a wheelchair’, ‘wheelchair bound’, or ‘crippled’. Similarly, do not use emotional descriptors such as ‘unfortunate’, ‘pitiful’, and so forth.
- Disability groups also strongly object to using euphemisms to describe disabilities. Terms such as ‘handicapable’, ‘mentally different’, ‘physically inconvenienced’, and ‘physically challenged’ are considered condescending. They reinforce the idea that disabilities cannot be dealt with ‘up front’.
- **Do not imply disease** when discussing disabilities that result from a prior disease episode. People who had polio and experienced after effects have a postpolio disability. They are



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not currently experiencing the disease. Do not imply disease with people whose disability has resulted from anatomical or physiological damage (e.g. person with spina bifida or cerebral palsy). Reference to disease associated with a disability is acceptable only with chronic diseases, such as arthritis, Parkinson's disease, or multiple sclerosis. Disabled people should never be referred to as patients or cases unless their relationship with their doctor is under discussion.

- **Show disabled people as active** participants of society. Portraying disabled people interacting with non-disabled people in social and work environments helps break down barriers and open lines of communications.

Listed below are preferred words that reflect a positive attitude in portraying disabilities:

- **Brain injury.** Describes a condition where there is long term or temporary disruption in brain function resulting from injury to the brain. Difficulties with the cognitive, physical, emotional, or social functioning may occur. Use 'person with a brain injury', 'woman who has sustained brain injury', or 'boy with an acquired brain injury'.
- **Cleft lip.** Describes a specific congenital disability involving lip and gum. The term 'hare lip' is anatomically incorrect and stigmatising. Use 'person who has a cleft lip' or 'has a cleft palate'.
- **Deaf.** Deafness refers to a profound degree of hearing loss that prevents understanding speech though the ear. Hearing impaired and hearing loss are generic terms used by some individuals to indicate any degree of hearing loss from mild to



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profound. These terms include people who are hard of hearing and deaf. However, some individuals completely disfavour the term 'hearing impaired'. Others prefer to use 'deaf or hard of hearing'. 'Hard of hearing' refers to a mild to moderate hearing loss that may or may not be corrected with amplification. Use 'woman who is deaf', 'boy who is hard of hearing', 'individuals with hearing losses', 'people who are deaf or hard of hearing'.

- **Disability.** General term used for a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability for example, to walk, lift, hear, or learn. It may refer to a physical, sensory, or mental condition. Use as a descriptive noun or adjective, such as 'person living with AIDS', 'woman who is blind'. Impairment refers to loss or abnormality of an organ or body mechanism, which may result in disability.
- **Disfigurement.** Refers to physical changes caused by burn, trauma, disease, or congenital problems.
- **Down syndrome.** Describes a chromosome disorder which usually causes a delay in physical, intellectual, and language development. Usually results in mental health problems. 'Mongol' or 'Mongoloid' are unacceptable terms.
- **Handicap.** Not a synonym for disability. Describes a condition or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or by one's own self. Some individuals prefer 'inaccessible' or 'not accessible' to describe social and environmental barriers. Handicap should not be used to describe a disability. Do not refer to disabled people as 'the handicapped' or 'handicapped people'. Say 'the building is not accessible for a wheelchair user'.
- **HIV/AIDS.** Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome is an infectious disease resulting in the loss of the body's immune



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system to ward off infections. The disease is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). A positive test for HIV can occur without symptoms of the illnesses which usually develop up to ten years later, including tuberculosis, recurring pneumonia cancer, recurrent vaginal yeast infections, intestinal ailments, chronic weakness and fever and profound weight loss. Say 'people living with HIV', 'people with AIDS' or 'living with AIDS'.

- **Mental impairment.** This term covers a wide range of impairments relating to mental functioning. The terms 'learning disability' or 'cognitive impairment' are acceptable.
- **Non-disabled.** Appropriate term for people without disabilities. 'Normal', 'able-bodied', 'healthy', or 'whole' are inappropriate.
- **Seizure.** Describes an involuntary muscular contraction, a brief impairment or loss of consciousness, etc. resulting from a neurological condition such as epilepsy or from an acquired brain injury. Rather than 'epileptic', say 'girl with epilepsy' or 'boy with a seizure disorder'. The term 'convulsion' should be used only for seizures involving contraction of the **entire** body.
- **Spastic.** Describes a muscle with sudden abnormal and involuntary spasm. Not appropriate for describing someone with cerebral palsy or a neurological disorder. **Muscles are spastic, not people.**
- **Stroke.** Caused by interruption of blood to brain. Hemiplegia (paralysis on one side) may result. 'Stroke survivor' is preferred to 'stroke victim'.



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