

Commentary

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Consideration of issues raised by Oliver will benefit those of us working with people affected by leprosy. We should be aware of, think about, and relate them to our work. Oliver, Professor of Disability Studies, provides a masterly introduction to a range of theories, implicit or explicit, which currently influence approaches to disability. In considering their relevance to leprosy, we glimpse an unfamiliar perspective on a familiar phenomenon. Definition and

theory are important as they underpin planning for services.¹ Furthermore, different theories and influences shape disability research.

The main issue noted is the distinction between impairment and disability. Consider the statement: 'disability is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others because of physical and social barriers' (p. 1447). In the leprosy world, our present positivistic dominated outlook focuses mainly on searches for cures, means of reducing impairments (POD), assessing clinical interventions – on classification and counting of disabled persons. A broader focus is needed if we are to achieve improvement in the quality of disabled people's lives. If disability is no longer viewed solely as (defined in Oliver's parlance) 'physical impairment', then we can investigate it as a social and political issue.

New areas of awareness and study might include:

- Understanding the reality of disability in people's lives.
- Understanding the extent and nature of the physical and social barriers to people participating in normal community life.
- Examination of the causes of disability defined as social barriers to normal participation.
- Study of the nature of stigma in various cultures together with action research of stigma reduction interventions.

People affected by leprosy might themselves be included in the design, collection and analysis of data (IDEA).

Professional medical geographers, sociologists, anthropologists and others have done leprosy related work. More could be done by researchers to illuminate vistas unfamiliar to medical colleagues. However, social scientists face difficulties in gaining approval and funds for research proposals similar to those mentioned by Oliver.

Foster² highlighted this problem in the World Health Organisation and behavioural science research in 1982 and 1987. Proposals for leprosy research of disability using theoretical approaches and methods not familiar to medical professionals need to be judged by professional social scientists. Then we will benefit from a broader focus in our view of disability.

References

- ¹ Volinn, I. J. Issues of definition and their implications: AIDS and leprosy. *Soc Sci Med*, 1989; **29**: 1157–1162.
- ² Foster, G. M. Applied anthropology and international health: retrospect and prospect. *Hum Org*, 1982; **41**: 189–197.