



Disabled people — are they a nursing priority?

The United Nations have designated 1981 as the "International Year of Disabled People". When reading through a pamphlet on this subject I wondered what the reaction of senior nurses would be to this subject reading it in a leader like *Nursing Focus* which is mainly devoted to nurse management or education.

Do senior nurses see they have any responsibility towards those millions of people who are disabled in our society?

It may be rather surprising to know that about five million, or eight per cent, of people in the United Kingdom suffer from some sort of disability, physical, sensory, or mental. Many of these relate to ageing, that is reduced mobility, declining eyesight and hearing. Most of us will become disabled at some time in our lives — yet so little attention seems to be drawn to this aspect of life. The world is built for healthy, highly mobile people. Do we ever really consider the needs of the disabled? Take employment — hospitals, like other employers, are required to employ three per cent of disabled people on their labour force. Look at an average type of district employing 7,000 staff, 210 should be employed as disabled. I doubt if there is one district in the country that even employs one per cent of its work force as disabled people.

Hospital and other public buildings often fail in their design to accommodate disabled persons adequately. Perhaps what is worse is the unnatural way the obviously disabled are treated. I have been connected for about seven years with the organisation called "The Torch Fellowship for the Blind". I have found that blind people want to be treated as normal human beings. They will talk about their blindness without embarrassment but it is the sighted people that become embarrassed. Recently, a teacher was persuaded very reluctantly to include a blind lady in her weekly local church house group. Her response after the meeting was quite remarkable: "It was great, she is just like one of us and she's lots of fun". Of course she is, she is a human being with the same sorts of emotions and expectations of life. How can it be put across in this year of the disabled person that disabled people need to be accepted and treated as normally as anyone else.

I do wonder how sensitive we as senior nurses really are to the needs of the disabled when helping to plan buildings. How do we really respond when going round large old-fashioned out-of-date hospitals and seeing the often inadequate, overcrowded facilities for the mentally ill, mentally handicapped, or the elderly. So often it is the local authorities that show this extra sensitiveness in making more adequate provision for disabled people. Do nurses really have the courage, or even the authority, to insist that the way present resources are being used should be reviewed. The objective would be to transfer some small amount from acute to other services to help the disabled? About £60,000 would give a district an evening community nursing service. Many disabled persons would have quality added to life just by being put to bed in the evening rather than the afternoon.

Perhaps as this is a New Year we could all resolve to look with new eyes at the services we provide or should be providing and ask continually "does this building, project or facility help or hinder a person to become a fully developed human being?" and take action accordingly.

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