Handout 1: Definitions of Disability

There are different ways to define disability depending upon the framework from which you are working, your personal view of the world, and possibly your cultural background.

Disability has historically been defined in Western culture in terms of a 'deficit model'. That is, the focus is on what a person is unable to do rather than what they can. It is seen as a negative condition that needs to be 'fixed' if possible.

Many people challenge this way of defining disability because they feel that the worth and individuality of people is not valued.

A traditional medical framework defined disability in terms of illness - a condition to be cured or treated. This sometimes resulted in people being seen in terms of their 'parts' rather than as a whole person. Many people with a disability do experience illness associated with their disability and so a medical approach is important. Today, however, there is a shift towards this approach being more holistic as health professionals work as teams to address the total needs of a person.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines disability in relation to its consequences for the individual and the impact the environment has on the experience of being disabled. It states that:

1. A person may have an impairment which is some abnormality in their anatomy or function e.g. a hearing loss.
2. This may result in a disability which is a loss or reduction in functional ability e.g. to communicate.
3. A handicap is the social or environmental disadvantage that a person may experience as a result of having a disability e.g. if everyone in the community knew how to use sign language the person with the hearing loss would not experience a communication disability.

This is a useful definition because it makes us think about how the environment creates the experience of being handicapped. If all buildings were physically accessible to everyone no matter what their mobility needs, then a person who uses a wheelchair is not handicapped in relation to physical access. Legislation and Government policy generally reflect this way of defining disability.

The most empowering way of defining disability is to consider people's differences to be part of the diversity of human expression. The focus is on people's unique individual strengths and abilities rather than on what they cannot do. This way of defining disability is taken up by the disability rights movement and reflects a social justice approach.

Library Links
A way with words: Guidelines for the portrayal of people with a disability from the Queensland Government Disability Services