

Breaking down barriers: Prevalence of disabilities grows worldwide

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By Tina Calabro /

It doesn't take much to imagine that people with disabilities in poor countries are worse off than their counterparts in wealthier ones. Or that better-off nations still have a long way to go in addressing unmet needs and barriers.

But now, for the first time, the actual situations of people with disabilities around the world are fully documented in the newly released World Report on Disability. The report, with its mission of assembling the best scientific evidence available on the subject, is a joint effort of the World Health Organization and the World Bank.

The formal launch of the report in the United States is taking place today in Washington, D.C., at a symposium co-chaired by Katherine Seelman, associate dean and professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences. Ms. Seelman, who served as director of the National Institute on Disability during the Clinton administration before joining Pitt a decade ago, contributed to the report and is one of its most visible representatives.

Kareem Dale, President Obama's top adviser for disability policy, will deliver the keynote speech to the symposium audience of 150 prominent disability-rights leaders.

The 300-page report -- a three-year undertaking -- provides a significant body of knowledge about health, rehabilitation, education, employment and other topics, and it offers an action plan for research, policy and practice.

Not that global consensus is easy to accomplish, said Ms. Seelman. "Consensus is hard; we can't even get consensus in our own families."

One of the report's most important findings is that the prevalence of disability is higher than previously thought: 15 percent of the world's population, or 1 billion people, have a disability of some type. The new figure replaces the often-used 10 percent estimate that dates to 1970s, the last time an estimate was attempted. Furthermore, the report states, prevalence of disability is growing because of aging, chronic health problems and other factors.

The report offers other snapshots:

- Eighty percent of the world's people with disabilities live in low-income countries, which have limited

mechanisms for health care, access and other needs. Everywhere in the world, disability is more common among the poor, women and aging people.

- Most developing countries fall short in regard to providing adequate services for people with disabilities. Higher-income nations, including the United States, continue to see high rates of poverty among people with disabilities and low levels of employment.
- Most countries in the world provide services for people with disabilities, but in the poorest countries, only those with the most significant difficulties receive help.
- Disability is diverse, as are the experiences of people with different categories of disability. Students with physical disabilities fare better in school than those with intellectual or sensory disabilities. People with mental health and intellectual disabilities are the most excluded from employment. People with most severe disabilities are the most economically disadvantaged.
- Lack of sanitation and infectious diseases, such as HIV, can lead to disability in the poorest counties. Diseases that are virtually unknown in the developed world -- such as malaria, leprosy and polio -- produce disability in poor nations.
- In locations of armed conflict, injuries and trauma are exacerbated when emergency care is delayed and rehabilitation is nonexistent.
- Access to technology that enables people with disabilities to accomplish functional tasks parallels the "digital divide" between rich and poor around the world.

The report's recommendations to nations include enabling access, investing in programs and research, improving the affordability of services, involving people with disabilities, and increasing public understanding. The report is also replete with examples of good practice throughout the world, such as accessible transportation in Brazil, educational policy in Vietnam, and return-to-work initiatives in Malaysia.

In addition to setting down an action plan, the report is meant to bolster the United Nations Convention on the Right of People with Disabilities, an international treaty introduced in 2008 that has been signed by 150 countries (including the United States) and ratified by 100. The U.S. Congress has not yet ratified it.

Ms. Seelman participated in the launch of World Report in Disability at the United Nations in June. The two documents -- the world report and the U.N. treaty -- support each other, she explained. "The report provides the evidence of need; the treaty is the moral position."

For the United States and its 55 million people with disabilities, the world report reinforces recent policy objectives such as affordable health care and access to technology while pointing to areas in need of improvement such as low employment rates.

Locally, Ronald LaPorte, professor of epidemiology at Pitt's Graduate School of Public Health, praised the report for providing the basis for nations to improve quality of life for people with disabilities. "Programs are in complete disarray across countries," he said, adding that he will distribute the report to his "Supercourse" network of 60,000 public health programs, medical schools and ministries of health around the world.

Clifford Brubaker, dean and founder of Pitt's School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, said the information contained in the report will expand students' understanding of disability in a global context. He noted that the school has a long record of attracting graduate students from developing nations who return to their countries after graduation as leaders in disability fields.

"Disability is part of the human condition," WHO Director-General Margaret Chan said in a statement about the report. "Almost every one of us will be temporarily or permanently disabled at some point in life. We must do more to break the barriers which segregate people with disabilities, in many cases forcing them to the margins of society."

To read the report, go to http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/en/index.html

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