

International Disability Day: Future is Accessible

Every year we talk about the International Day of People with Disabilities (IDPWD), the theme, scope and our vision. The United Nations has been observing IDPWD since 1992 after passing the United Nations General Assembly resolution 47/3. Every year, it provides a theme to comprehensively focus on how society can strive for and achieve inclusivity by removing physical, attitudinal and technological barriers for the differently abled. Theme of IDPWD-2019 is "THE FUTURE IS ACCESSIBLE", which means that we must together look towards a future where the barriers which stand in people's way no longer exist. We physiatrists should stand by its conviction that a person is not inherently 'disabled'. Persons with disabilities might have impairments and may require wheelchair, orthotic or prosthetic device just as so-called normal people may need glasses, medications and inhaler for their health impairments. No impairment should stop us from functioning or participating in the community.

This year, our focus is to make sure that environmental and social BARRIERS are identified and to help everyone to work together to overcome them. We can never eradicate health impairments but we can eradicate disablement by overcoming barriers. Only then we can show our gesture mobilize and support for the dignity, well-being and rights of persons with disabilities.

Demographic data state that world population is over seven billion and more than one billion (approximately 15 per cent) live with some form of disability; 80 per cent live in developing countries. According to the Census of India, 2011, there are 26.8 million people (2.21 per cent of the total population) with disabilities (PWDs) in India.

In India, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, has various implementing limitations. It has not achieved much in terms of providing enabling environments across sections of populations with various forms of disabilities. We don't see public places fulfilling the building standards as per the laws that make pathways and buildings accessible to the disabled. Few places have put ramps in place but that is not enough infrastructural input. The inclusivity of "leaving no one behind" is missing and inter-departmental coordination to fulfill goals to make accessibility a priority is lacking as much as it is in understanding and accepting people with disability.

Both structural and attitudinal changes are required across the society for including persons with disabilities in development and this is not achievable unless accessibility is becoming a fundamental criterion. As physiatrists we can help to empower our patients and give them knowledge and guidance to help them to modify and make suitable changes in their home environment towards physical barrier reduction and accessibility. The government, non-government organizations and civil society must work together to create a society that enables people with disability to fulfill their potential as equal citizens. Improving the lives of people with disability, their families and caregivers must be a strategic agenda of all the governments.

A truly accessible future must be inclusive and equitable. Today, we should introspect to acknowledge and address the yawning gaps in access, participation, and opportunities that persons with disabilities continue to systematically encounter. We envisage a future where people can access a school, or any other building, to their work place without using stairs. They will even have access to a ramp to the beach. Working toward an accessible future is everyone's responsibility. Last but not least, the future society should be formed with an ideal environment where people will not be excluded because of their impairments.

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