Defining the Disabled Underclass

by Ken Davis

This document was written by Ken Davis.

Ken Davis was a member of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS).

He also started the Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People and Derbyshire Centre for Integrated Living.

We don't know when he wrote this document or what for.

It could have been for a talk he gave, or for a newspaper or magazine.

We found it in a box of someone else's belongings.

We think it was written between 1987 and 1989, but we're not sure.

This document is about defining the different words that are used about disabled people, like **disability**, **impairment** and **handicap**, and what each of those words mean.

Ken Davis says that there are different things that different people say each of those words mean.

This is important because people who use these words in different ways have different ideas about disabled people.

The words people use, and the way they use them, can tell you a lot about their ideas.

In the Disabled People's Movement, we need to know what other people's ideas about disability are, so that we can decide if we agree with them or not.

Ken says that most people seem to think that there is a type of body that is "normal", but no one ever says exactly what that is.

The words **impairment**, **disability** and **handicap** are all used to describe people whose bodies are not what most people think of as "normal".

Different people use these words to mean different things.

The ways that people use the words depend on what they think is the right way to treat disabled people.

Most of the time these words are used, non-disabled people decide what they mean.

Ken says that those people do not understand what life is like for disabled people because they have not experienced it.

Ken thinks that the different ways that most people use the words **impairment**, **disability** and **handicap** all follow the **medical model** of disability.

The **medical model** means thinking that disability is a problem that disabled people have inside ourselves.

In the medical model, we are disabled because there is something wrong with our bodies.

That means that doctors and hospitals should try to fix us.

One organisation that uses the medical model is the **World Health Organisation**.

The World Health Organisation is a powerful group of doctors from all over the world.

They make rules about healthcare that other doctors are supposed to follow.

The World Health Organisation has definitions that they use for the words **impairment**, **disability** and **handicap**.

They say the word **impairment** means something that is missing, not normal, or not working properly in people's bodies or brains.

They say the word **disability** means not being able to do things that most people think are normal, because you have an impairment.

They say the word **handicap** means being worse off because of impairment or disability.

This could mean not doing the things that people think are normal for people of your gender, culture and age group to do.

Ken says that the way the World Health Organisation uses these words means they are saying that all the problems that disabled people have are because of our bodies.

Lots of disabled people have felt guilty or ashamed of themselves because they have believed this.

But there are many things that happen in our daily lives that show that this is not true.

Ken says that disabled people have been lied to by the non-disabled people who decided to use these words with these meanings.

Over time, disabled people have started to realise this, and to stop believing the bad things that non-disabled people say about us.

We have started to realise that it is disabled people who should get to say what it means to be a disabled person, not non-disabled people who think they know best because of their jobs.

But still disabled people sometimes use words in the ways that non-disabled people want us to.

Ken says that this is like falling into a trap.

One example is people thinking it is better to say "people with disabilities" instead of "disabled people".

People who say "people with disabilities" may not realise that they are saying that disability is a problem that belongs to us and is in our own bodies.

There was an **International Year of Disabled People** in 1981. The slogan for the year was "think of the person not the disability".

Saying this also says that disability is a problem that belongs to us and is in our own bodies.

Some people think that it is right to say "people with disabilities" instead of "disabled people" because they think that we should put the word "people" first in the sentence.

They think that this is important because it is saying that we are people like everyone else.

Ken thinks that this is wrong because being disabled is important and we should not ignore or forget about it.

We need to talk about the problems in our lives as disabled people so we can decide how to solve them.

If non-disabled people get to say what the problem is, they also get to say what the solution to the problem is.

This might not be a good solution for disabled people or one that actually solves the problem.

Ken says that people who use words like **disability**, **impairment** and **handicap** in a medical model way do not want people to think about the real problems for disabled people.

Non-disabled people who use those words in that way want things for disabled people to stay the same, not to get better.

There are a lot of people with jobs working with disabled people, like social workers and managers of care homes, who have power over disabled people.

Ken calls this the **disability industry**.

The disability industry makes money from disabled people.

The services for disabled people that the disability industry wants might not be the services that disabled people want.

If disabled people decided how to solve their own problems, people in the disability industry might not get to keep their jobs or their power.

Some disabled people still use words like **disability**, **impairment** and **handicap** in the same ways as the disability industry.

This helps to keep the disability industry having power over disabled people.

This also makes it harder to find new ways to talk about the things that disabled people really want.

Other Disabled people have been trying to find new ways to talk about disability that describe what really happens in their lives.

One group of disabled people who have come up with better ways to use these words is the **Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS)**.

**UPIAS** were the first disabled people's organisation to suggest a different way of using words like **impairment** and **disability**.

In the way that the UPIAS think people should use the words, **impairment** means not having a body part that most people have (like an arm or a leg) or having things in your body that do not work like most people's.

This is not very different from the way the WHO use the word **impairment**.

The word that UPIAS use differently is **disability**.

**Disability** means the ways that society treats people who have impairments worse than people who do not have impairments.

One example is when disabled people are stopped from doing things that they want to do because there are buildings that they can not get into.

Another example is when disabled people are not given the help they need to get to places or do activities.

UPIAS said that this happens because society does not care about people who have impairments.

The Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation decided not to use the word **handicap**.

UPIAS wanted people to understand that disability is caused by society, not by disabled people's bodies.

They did not want their new definitions of words like **impairment** and **disability** to just be something interesting to talk about.

They wanted to get rid of the medical model definitions used by people and organisations like the WHO.

The definitions of words like impairment and disability used by the UPIAS are meant to point out that disability is caused by society.

They are meant to get people to do things that will make society better for disabled people and to get governments to make different decisions about what services to spend money on.

These definitions can help disabled people take control of our own lives.

They can help us stop non-disabled people in positions of power from controlling our lives.

These definitions helped the Disabled People’s Movement to make the **social model of disability**.

The social model says that disability is not a problem in disabled people's bodies, but a problem with how society treats disabled people.

Ken says that the non-disabled people who control things in Britain now benefit from disabled people being an **underclass**.

An **underclass** is a group of people have less power than other people, or who are thought of as not useful to society.

People in an underclass usually do not get to work to earn money.

Disabled people in Britain often do not get to work because of how most jobs are set up.

They cannot earn enough to pay for the things they need, so they have to put up with what the disability industry gives them.

People in the disability industry will only do things which are good for them and their jobs, without asking disabled people what they want.

If this keeps happening, disabled people will not have control over our own lives.

The **British Council of Organisations of Disabled People** (**BCODP)** was a group of disabled people's organisations from all over Britain who got together to decide what they wanted to do.

The BCODP decided that they agreed with UPIAS, and wanted to talk about disability as something caused by society.

They convinced other disabled people around the world that this was the right way to think and talk about disability.

Ken says that the medical model way of using words is still very common in Britain.

This is because non-disabled people who think they are experts on disability still have a lot of power over disabled people.

Ken thinks that in Britain people should be using the definitions of **impairment** and **disability** that UPIAS uses.

Using the words **impairment** and **disability** this way will help disabled people's organisations to get the government to pass laws against treating disabled people worse than non-disabled people.

These laws are called **anti-discrimination** laws.

Ken says that we need to make sure that people are using the right definitions of words like **impairment** and **disability** throughout the Disabled People’s Movement.