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Working together against "disabilism"

Scope's new campaign to expose 'disabilism' finally sees this charity organization working alongside rights activists. But how long can this delicate truce last?

A man who killed his 40-year-old disabled brother by suffocation, a woman who gave her paraplegic husband a lethal dose of insulin, and hospital doctors who refused to treat an 18-month-old girl whose disability meant she could not raise her head off the pillow ... these are all extreme examples of "disabilism" that, since 1990, have led to the deaths of 628 disabled people, according to the activist organization Disability Awareness in Action (DAA).

The word "disabilism" is not in the dictionary, but a report published recently on this issue of discrimination against the disabled hopes to put it high on the political and social agenda, alongside sexism and racism.

The report, called "Disabilism: How to Tackle the Last Prejudice", was launched by the Home Secretary, David Blunkett. It argues that people with disabilities are typically seen as objects of pity or compassion who require charity and services, and that such attitudes are an insidious form of discrimination - failing to recognise disabled people as human beings with full civil rights.

"If you do not name that which has to be defeated, it will not be beaten," the report says. It defines *disabilism* as "discriminatory, oppressive or abusive behaviour arising from the belief that disabled people are inferior to others".

What is really new about the report is its collaboration with two hitherto opposing factions of the disability sector: the activist organizations run by disabled people themselves, and the big disability charity organizations run for disabled people but with few disabled staff, especially at senior level.

The cerebral palsy charity organization Scope, which only last year was accused by disabled activists of pursuing policies that failed to provide real choice, independence and dignity for people with disabilities, invited the DAA to take part.

"Many in the movement didn't want me to do this," says Rachel Hurst, director of the DAA. "The charity organizations have been so actively part of the problem, but Tony Manwaring [Scope chief executive] has a new vision and he's trying to make Scope an ally of the movement."

Last month, Scope's appointment of Andy Rickell - another leader of the movement - was seen as the first sign that it was seriously addressing the concerns of disability activists. In fact, Rickell is leading an initiative to increase the number of disabled people employed by the charity and other employers.

Now Scope has adopted the term *disabilism* publicly for the first time. "Because of Scope's attitude, this is a real opportunity to put forward this concept to a wider audience," Hurst says. "We've been using the term for years, but it's been ignored because most people don't want to accept that society's treatment of disabled people is discriminatory."

So does this unprecedented collaboration represent a maturing of the disability sector, or a sell-out by the activists?

For Hurst, it is a pragmatic response to a lack of funds and political power. While Scope can make its points of view clear to government and policy-makers, disabled activists such as herself are, she says, seen as "a bunch of cripples playing at being human rights experts".

With advances in genetics and the promotion of eugenic solutions to disability, Hurst believes it is imperative to have a mainstream debate about disabilism.

Manwaring is clear that Scope's goal of profound systemic social change requires an inclusive approach. "Getting charity organizations and others which defend the rights of the disabled together is just the beginning," he says. "We need to get many other social sectors involved, not just the disability sector."

Scope and DAA have drawn up a "statement of collaboration" for the project that sets out principles on which they can agree. The most striking one is a commitment from Scope "in wishing an end to the ... compulsory segregation of disabled people".

Manwaring is keen to stress that, far from being pressured by disabled activists, whom he says accuse Scope of running institutions that are "like jails", he wanted that particular principle in the statement. The key word is "compulsory", he says. "Many people tell us they want to be in our residential units, and we're not going to throw them out on to the streets".

But he confirms that Scope is developing a strategy for its segregated schools, colleges and residential units to create new models based on the principles of "independence and choice for the service user". Just as important, Scope pledges to "take into consideration" the imbalance of resources and power between the rights groups and disability charities. "We aim to use our resources to give a public platform to people like Hurst," explains Manwaring.

Mark Priestly, lecturer in disability studies at Leeds University, broadly welcomes Scope's intent to challenge disabilism and to share resources. But he warns that the intent has to be matched by tangible outcomes. "We need to keep a critical eye on the organization to make sure they are not in fact perpetuating the values they are seeking to challenge," he says.

The report is the first stage of Scope's "Time to Get Equal" campaign, to make

people aware of disabilism. Next week, billboard advertisements will appear across the country carrying the message: "We're disabled. Not from another planet." A summit meeting on disabilism for politicians and policy-makers will follow.

But unless the campaign has the full backing of all the big seven disability charities and the whole of the disability rights movement, isn't it likely to fail? No other organization has yet joined the campaign and Manwaring is not sure if any will. "We hope to work with other disability rights groups locally, as well as nationally, but we need to take one step at a time," he says.

Asked if she would work together with any of the other large disability charities to further DAA's aims, Hurst's response shows there is still a long way to go. She replies bluntly: "For the moment, definitely not."