



Terminology Guidelines Referring to People with Disabilities

A disability is but one part of a person's life; not to be a focal point, yet not to be ignored.

As we become more aware of the impact certain words or phrases have on others, acceptable terminology is revised and improved. Words used by healthcare professionals and the media play a major role in shaping the public image of individuals with disabilities. It is our obligation to set standards by choosing words that portray a positive view of individuals with disabilities, rather than a view that is negative or insensitive.

Disability refers to an inability to perform an activity in a manner that most people the same age are able to. **Impairment** refers to a loss or alteration of function or body structure. These two words are accurate and well accepted, and should be used instead of **handicapped** or **crippled**, which portray a more helpless or hopeless image. Some prefer the use of **less abled**.

Just as we don't refer to a patient as "the fractured hip in room 208," it is important to avoid labeling people with disabilities. Use people-first language to emphasize the person, not their impairment. Stating "**a person with a spinal cord injury**" is preferred to "**a spinal cord injured person.**"

Certain words also tend to label people negatively. The words **victim**, **survivor**, and the phrases **bound** or **confined to a wheelchair** are condescending, and should be avoided. Emphasize ability, rather than disability. A wheelchair enables mobility; stating a person **uses a wheelchair** is more accurate and appropriate.

Accuracy is the reason for other preferred terminology choices. **Brain injury** is preferred over **head injury** unless referring to skin or skull damage. **Tetraplegia** has been recognized as the universal term for quadriplegia, although both are acceptable. And when teaching injury prevention, alternative terms are preferred for the word **accident**, which infers a situation that is inevitable, rather than preventable. Substitutions include motor vehicle **crash**, diving **incident** or **injury**, and day of **injury**.

A disability is but one part of a person's life. By choosing language that is accurate, positive and respectful, we help others realize the whole person, and the impact of the words we use.