Journalist's guide
to intellectual disability

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The IHC Communications Team has developed some guidelines to support journalists when reporting or interviewing people with an intellectual disability.

Over time, language changes, as will this list – but it's a good starting point to use the correct terminology and avoid using outdated or hurtful words.

If you have any questions, please contact us at ihccomms@ihc.org.nz.

What is an intellectual disability?

Intellectual disability is a term used when a person has difficulty understanding, concentrating, learning and remembering new things in their everyday life.

People with an intellectual disability may need support to develop new skills, understand complex information and communicate with other people.

An intellectual disability almost always becomes evident during the developmental years. Despite certain limitations, people with an intellectual disability often have other strengths and capabilities.

People with an intellectual disability are all very different individuals. Some of them have additional health problems or disabilities that can make their lives harder.

Different types of intellectual disabilities

There are different types of intellectual disabilities, which can be classified as mild, moderate, severe or profound. In all cases an intellectual disability is lifelong.

These categories are not rigid and there are no clear dividing lines between the different groups. It's important to realise that language is constantly changing. The words we use to describe intellectual disability have changed over time, and will continue to change, as a result of listening to people with personal experience and as a result of changing values and attitudes in society.

IHC believes it's much more useful to address how much support a person with an intellectual disability might need instead of classifying to which group they belong. However, an agreed definition can be useful to let us know which people will be included for funding and support, how to diagnose it and how to plan supports for people to live satisfying lives in the community.

Reporting on intellectual disability*

There are some words that you should avoid when reporting on intellectual disability.

- **Brave:** Having an intellectual disability does not equate to being brave. Don't use this word unless there are special circumstances in which a person has demonstrated bravery.

- **Despite:** People with an intellectual disability are active in their community because of their abilities, not despite their disability.

- **Disadvantaged:** Don't describe a person as disadvantaged just because they have an intellectual disability. A disability in itself shouldn't be assumed to be a disadvantage, although often society's response to a person's disability can be a disadvantage.

- **Handicapped / Retarded:** Don't describe a person as handicapped or retarded just because they have an intellectual disability. This terminology is no longer used and can be harmful.

- **Normal:** Using normal implies that people with a disability are abnormal and is exclusionary. Phrases including 'person without a disability' or 'the wider population' are preferable.

- **People/person with disabilities:** Can imply only people with more than one disability. The use of 'people/person with a disability' is preferable. However, if the person has more than one disability, you can use 'people/person with disabilities'

- **People like this / These people:** This kind of language implies that people with an intellectual disability are outside the norm, and they are exceptional or excluded in some way.

- **Special needs:** People with an intellectual disability may feel patronised if they are referred to as having special needs.

- **Sufferer / Suffers from:** Referring to someone as a cystic fibrosis sufferer amounts to defining a person in terms of an illness. If the person's exact illness or disability must be mentioned, it would be better to say a person with cystic fibrosis. Equally, having a disability or a serious medical condition does not automatically equate to suffering and the use of 'suffering' or 'sufferer' may be considered patronising.

- **Wheelchair bound:** Saying that someone is wheelchair bound makes it sound like they are confined to a wheelchair and can take away any sense of independence. If needed, it's preferable to say 'someone who uses a wheelchair' or 'wheelchair user'

Information about IHC and the wider organisation

The IHC Group of Charities encompasses three wholly-owned subsidiaries with contract funding and community programmes funded by donations.

IHC advocates for the rights, inclusion and welfare of all people with intellectual disabilities. It supports them to live satisfying lives in the community. IHC provides advocacy, volunteering, events, membership associations and fundraising.

When IHC was founded in 1949, it was called the Intellectually Handicapped Children's Parents' Association. However, as language has changed over time the organisation refers to itself as IHC, without spelling out the acronym. Additionally, it is 'IHC', not 'the IHC'.

IDEA Services is New Zealand's largest provider of services for people with intellectual disabilities. IDEA Services supports adults of all ages with intellectual disabilities to live independently and be part of their local communities. This includes residential care, supported living and vocational support.

'IDEA' Services needs to be spelled out in capital letters, not 'Idea' Services.

Choices NZ helps people with all disabilities and health-related conditions achieve their goals. This is achieved through flexible support relationships and access to community services.

It is written as 'Choices NZ', not 'Choices' or 'Choices New Zealand'.

Accessible Properties is a social and disability housing provider. It is committed to providing housing that meets tenants' needs and tenancy services that support long-term, successful inclusive living in a community.

Interviewing people with an intellectual disability

It's always important to consider the rights of people with intellectual disability in the media. If you would like to connect with someone who has an intellectual disability for your story, we might be able to support you to do this.

Here are some questions regarding human rights that we've developed for you to consider:

Respect:

- Have you allowed the subject(s) of your story to speak for themselves?

- Have you referred to the person by name in the same way that non-disabled people in the story are referred to?

- Have you asked whether the person wants their disability mentioned?

- Is emotive language used aimed at raising awareness or eliciting pity?

- Does the language used make the person seem like a victim not a person with a disability?

Dignity:

- Do the words being used about people with disabilities help to change attitudes or understanding or perpetuate prejudice and ignorance?

- Have you used language that may cause offence to people with intellectual disability?

- Have you used correct terminology or relied upon popular terms or stereotypes which may be insulting or insensitive?

- Are the facts accurate – will media exposure create unintended negative consequences?

Privacy:

- Has the person consented to being in the media? (this covers print and electronic media)

- Have they considered any longer-term consequences of private information being forever available?

- If writing about a child, is it enough for the parent to give consent? How might they feel as an adult to have private information about them available?

- Would you want to have information like this in the media about you?

Safety:

- Does information in the story create safety risks, e.g. living alone, hours when others not around?

- Does the story identify details about where they live? Would this information make them vulnerable to unwanted attention?

- Does the information encourage understanding or incite prejudice?

- Are you sure that media portrayal is not exploiting a person with an intellectual disability for commercial use?

Modified from Endeavour Foundation