

Electrical Hypersensitivity (EHS) and the ‘Social Model’ of Disability

David Fancy, PhD. Department of Dramatic Arts, Brock University

Impacts of Wireless Technology on Health: A symposium for
Ontario’s medical community. Women’s College Hospital, Toronto.
May 31st 2019.

EHS as a Disability?

- ▶ Which 'model' or 'models' of disability are appropriate to think about EHS?
- ▶ What models already exist?
- ▶ What implications do each of these models have for how EHS is treated?
- ▶ What implications do each of these models have how EHS individuals are understood, viewed, and accommodated (or not) in our current social and technological moment?

“Accommodation for Environmental Sensitivities: Legal Perspective” (2007)

Authored by Cara Wilkie and David Baker Canadian Human Rights Commission.

Broadly argue that like multiple chemical sensitivities, sensitivities to electromagnetic fields can serve as important barriers to accessing social space and services, and as such constitute disabilities.

'Models' of Disability



Historical Religious Perspectives



Medical Model



Social Model

Medical Model



Cognitive authority is scientist or doctor.



Disability is an individual or medical phenomenon, one that results from impairments in body functions or structures.



Disability as a biological product.



A deviation from a biological norm, a deficiency or abnormality.

Medical Model (con't)

Healthcare professionals set out to correct the deviation to the greatest extent possible, thereby rendering the disabled person normal again.

Thereby allowing that disabled individual to become a better functioning member of the existing society.

Often the person providing the help, assistance or intervention in the medical model is a professional of some form or another.

Frequently the disability itself becomes a—if not the—defining characteristic for the individual living with a disability.

FINAL REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

December 2018

Care Now

An Action Plan to Improve Care for People with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS), Fibromyalgia (FM) and Environmental Sensitivities/Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (ES/MCS)

- ▶ “Many patients are told that “it’s all in your head”, which is both frustrating and stigmatizing. In fact, people with these conditions face significant stigma and discrimination within the health care system, the workplace and society at large.”
- ▶ *Dr. Ray Copes, Chair of Expert Panel*

Internalization of Socially Constructed Norms of Disability

- ▶ The internalization or introjection of these external projections also significantly affects the self-perception and mental health of the impaired individual.

Brittain, I. (2004). Perceptions of disability and their impact upon involvement in sport for people with disabilities at all levels. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 28, 429-452.

Current and Forthcoming Legislation

- ▶ **The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005**

(<https://www.ontario.ca/page/about-accessibility-laws#section-1>)

- ▶ **Bill C-81, the proposed Accessible Canada Act**

(<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/accessible-people-disabilities/act-summary.html>)

Social Model of Disability

- ▶ Separates **impairment** from **disability**.
- ▶ **Impairment** is considered an abnormality or difference in the body of an individual or individuals.
- ▶ For **EHS Impairment** is: physiological responses to varying levels of human-made electromagnetic emissions that results in experience of significant neurological and other pain, brain fog, peripheral neuropathy, inflammation, and many other symptoms.

Social Model of Disability (con't)

- ▶ The **disability** on the other hand is considered to be the restriction in activity and resulting disadvantages caused by a social group, organization, or overall society that does not take into account the impairment of individuals and thereby excludes them from full participation in community life.

Social Model of Disability (con't)

Impairment =

the symptomology or biological difference the individual experiences compared to a general median population.

Disability =

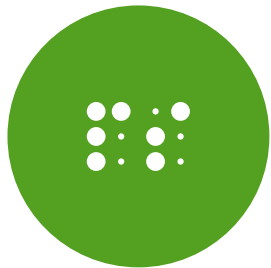
the limitations the impaired individual faces in a society unprepared to accommodate them and unwilling to make itself accessible to them.



In Social Model...

Technological proliferation and people's use of technology bear a part of responsibility for EHS lack of access to community life.

Many Barriers for Canadian EHS



DIFFICULTIES IN BEING
DIAGNOSED AND
RECEIVING
CONTINUING CARE.



ATTITUDINAL
BARRIERS.



DIFFICULTIES
ACCESSING MANY
PUBLIC SPACES.



DIFFICULTIES
ACCESSING PRIVATE
SPACE OF ONE'S OWN
DWELLING.

Scientists Attuned to Social Context

- ▶ Johansson, Olle. Electrohypersensitivity: State-of-the-Art of a Functional Impairment. *Electromagnetic Biology and Medicine* (2006) 25: 245-258.
- ▶ Havas, Magda. Electrohypersensitivity (EHS) is an Environmentally-Induced Disability that Requires Immediate Attention. *J Sci Discov* (2019); 3(1):jsd18020.

Bill C-81 Accessible Canada Act: Definitions

- ▶ **Barrier:** means anything - including anything physical, architectural, technological or attitudinal, anything that is based on information or communications or anything that is the result of a policy or a practice - that hinders the full and equal participation in society of persons with a physical, mental, intellectual, learning, communication or sensory impairment or a functional limitation.
- ▶ **Disability:** means a physical, mental, intellectual, learning, communication or sensory impairment—or a functional limitation—whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person’s full and equal participation in society.

Moving Forward...



Access to treatment should not solely via referral by diagnosis, but resources to be provided for individuals with experience-driven self-diagnoses to begin taking care of themselves.



Rather than focusing solely on normalizing the EHS individual by removing their sensitivity, environmental barriers to access that induce the disability need to be reduced and removed.



More work on networks of allies and mutual caregiving provides agency back into the hands of the affected.



Rather than the individual being perceived simply as faulty, they can be understood to be unique, and thus equally deserving of respect and social inclusion as anyone else.

Experience of EHS Ultimately Beneficial to Whole Population

By pushing back on socially imposed barriers to access and by pushing back on saturated high EMF exposure, EHS individuals are actually serving to improve the lives of others.

Thank You!

Works referenced include:

- ▶ Brittain, I. (2004). Perceptions of disability and their impact upon involvement in sport for people with disabilities at all levels. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 28, 429-452. doi:10.1177/ 0193723504268729
- ▶ Donoghue, C. (2003). Challenging the authority of the medical definition of disability: An analysis of the resistance to the social constructionist paradigm. *Disability & Society*, 18(2), 199-208. doi:10.1080/0968759032000052833
- ▶ Haegele, J. & Hodge, S. (2016) Disability Discourse: Overview and Critiques of the Medical and Social Models, *Quest*, 68:2, 193-206, DOI: 10.1080/00336297.2016.1143849
- ▶ Turnbull III, H. R., & Stowe, M. J. (2001). Five models for thinking about disability: Implications for policy responses. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 12(3), 198-205. doi:10.1177/ 104420730101200305