

Making Haste Slowly: South Africa's Transition from a Medical to a Social Model regarding Persons with Disabilities

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Abstract : Historically, in South Africa, disability has been viewed as a dilemma of the individual. The discourse surrounding the definition of disability and applicable theories are as fluid as the differing needs of persons with disabilities within society. In 1997, the Office of the Deputy President published the White Paper on the Integrated National Disability Strategy (WPINDS) which sought to integrate disability issues in all governmental development strategies, planning and programs as well as to solidify the South African government's stance that disability was to be considered according to the social model and not the, previously utilized, medical model of disability. The models of disability are conceptual frameworks for understanding disability and can provide some insight into why certain attitudes exist and how they are reinforced in society. Although the WPINDS was regarded as a critical milestone in the history of the disability rights struggle in South Africa; it has taken approximately twenty years for the publication of a similar document taking into account South Africa's changing social, economic, political and technological dispensation. December 2015 marked the approval of the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (WPRPD) which seeks to update the WPINDS, integrate principles contained in international law instruments and endorse a mainstreaming trajectory for realizing the rights of persons with disabilities. While the WPINDS and the WPRPD were published two decades apart, both documents contain an emphasis on a transition from the medical model to the social model. Whereas, the medical model presupposes that disability is mainly a health and welfare matter and is focused on an individualistic and dependency-based approach; the social model requires a paradigm shift in the manner in which disability is constructed so as to highlight the shortcomings of society in respect of disability and to bring to the fore the capabilities of persons with disabilities. The social model has led to unmatched success in changing the perceptions surrounding disability. This article seeks to investigate the progress made in the implementation of the social model in South Africa by taking into account the effect of the diverse political and cultural landscape in promoting the historically entrenched medical model and the rise of disability activism prior to the new democratic dispensation as well as legislation, case law, policy documents and barriers in respect of persons with disabilities that are pervasive in South African society. The research paper will conclude that although numerous interventions have been identified and implemented to promote the consideration of disability within a social construct in South Africa, such interventions require increased national and international collaboration, resources and pace to ensure that the efforts made lead to sustainable results. For persons with disabilities, what remains to be seen is whether the proliferation of activism by interest groups, social awareness as well as the development of policy documents, legislation and case law will serve as the impetus to dissipate the view that disability is burden to be carried solely on the shoulders of the person with the disability.

Keywords : disability, medical model, social model, societal barriers, South Africa

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