

Lazy thinking restricting people with disabilities, says President

Kitty Holland

Too many people with disabilities led lives that were "only half-lived" because of "lack of opportunity, lack of choice . . . too much of that lazy old thinking", President Mary McAleese said yesterday.

Addressing a conference in Dublin on independent living for people with disabilities, Mrs McAleese described the thinking that placed restrictions on the lives of people with disabilities as "awful arrogance".

"What a waste of talents and skills it can lead to - for the individual, for his or her family and for all of us as a community.



"There can be no quiet acceptance of that arrogance and no putting up with the obstacle course it has created over many generations of skewed thinking about disability," said Mrs McAleese. The conference, hosted by the Centre for Independent Living (CIL) at Croke Park, heard calls from a number of international experts for direct payments to people with disabilities so they could directly employ carers and assistants.

Eugene Callan, chairman of Dublin CIL, said there was no system of direct payments here and that 7,553 people were "waiting to be assessed [by the HSE] for personal assistants".

Prof Colin Barnes, research director for the British Council of Disabled People, described direct payments as "the key" to independent living.

"All human life, regardless of the physical, sensory or intellectual disability, is of equal worth." Everyone must have the right to exercise choice over their own life, he said.

To make independence a reality there were a number of needs that had to be met, including information, help with using the information, accessible housing, accessible transport, an accessible environment, as well as employment, training, leisure and advocacy.

"All are essential for independent living and for many the key is direct payments - to give people control."

In Britain, he said, there were numerous schemes administered variously by local authorities and trusts, which enabled people to directly employ personal assistants for help with such areas as dressing, housework, cooking, getting to work and visiting friends.

He said that the positive impact was not only for the disabled person who gained improved skills, quality of life, and self-esteem, but also for the family and the wider community.

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