

FRIENDS OF THE SCOTSMAN /

The 'new normal' will be anything but for people with a visual impairment

When the Scottish Government published its route map out of lockdown many people started talking about getting back to 'something like normality' or a 'new normal.' There is a sense of relief that the worst of lockdown is over. We can now meet family and friends while observing social distancing and are even looking to the prospect of holidaying within Scotland. Our social media has been full of cheery pictures of people meeting up after weeks apart, more retailers are looking to open and schools are set to return in August.

Amid all the more optimistic talk of getting back to normality, very little time has been spent considering those people for whom this 'new normal' will not apply. For thousands of blind and partially sighted people in Scotland, social distancing means a return to normality seems a distant hope.

If you can't see who is around you, maintaining a distance of two metres from anyone else is simply not possible. This makes getting out and about very difficult for people living with sight loss, and has made shopping, using public transport, and even accessing public areas extremely challenging. People with visual impairment have been particularly affected by lockdown, which left many more isolated, having to cope with less support and struggling to access essential provisions like food.



For blind and partially sighted people, social distancing means a return to normality seems a distant hope, writes Mark O'Donnell

Now they face an end to lockdown which threatens to increase inequality for them in our society.

While we are looking forward to an end to life indoors, many blind and partially sighted people are anxious about the new world which awaits them outside. New temporary cycle lanes are springing up to encourage more people to cycle to work. This can cause very real problems for blind pedestrians who can't identify the new lanes and often can't hear cyclists approaching. Pupils with visual impairment will face significant challenges in social distancing in our schools, as will blind and partially sighted employees in workplaces. Many people living with sight loss are worried about how people will react to them when they are trying to maintain social distancing without being able to see their surroundings. We were very concerned by the findings of a survey by Disability Equality Scotland that disabled people had been asked why they were outside during social distancing, with some even experiencing hate crime incidents as a result.

We are concerned the economic impacts of the pandemic will hit disabled people the hardest. Blind and partially sighted people of working age are already twice as likely to be out of work than people who are not disabled. Rapidly increasing unemployment threatens to make this inequality even worse. In our schools, while all pupils have been affected by the disruption in schooling, pupils with visual impairment already start at a disadvantage to their fully sighted peers and social distancing will present them with new challenges in the classroom. When decisions need to be made over how the costs to the public purse of emergency measures such as furloughing will be met, it is imperative the answer is not a continuation of austerity policies which have been devastating for the disabled community.

In recent decades, progress has been made in advancing the rights of disabled people. It's vital the pandemic does not mean the clock is turned back on these hard-won victories. However, today's reality is that fundamental principles established by the



Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in relation to accessibility, social protection and participation are being breached. It is not enough to hope and expect employers, retailers and public services will respect their duties under equalities legislation when they make arrangements for social distancing. There

must be clear guidance from government which offers them support and advice on how they can provide access for disabled people during social distancing, and which stresses their obligation to do so. It's also important there is a public awareness campaign so we all understand the obligation each of us has to help

people with visual impairment cope with social distancing, and recognise that sight loss can be an invisible disability.

We all have a role to play to ensure this unprecedented situation does not become overwhelming for our blind and partially sighted citizens. We can achieve this if we are guided

by kindness in our interactions with others as we all deal with social distancing, and if our government and public agencies are conscious of the need to do far more in these challenging times to protect the rights of disabled people.

Mark O'Donnell, chief executive, Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded.

↑ The easing of lockdown threatens to increase inequality for blind and partially sighted people in our society



Who decides what a life is worth? Not the weak and defenceless

Everyone has an equal value in a truly civilised society, says Calum MacKellar

The claim that certain human lives do not matter or that they have less value and worth than others is now increasingly being accepted in society. Thus, it is suggested that if a life does not reach a certain minimum quality threshold or deemed worthwhile then it should not be brought into existence or should be ended. For example, UK legislation has already agreed that the lives of some children are so terrible because of unavoidable suffering that they should not exist. Indeed, this is the main ideology behind the reproductive selection procedures taking place right now with embryos and foetuses affected by disability. In England and Wales, 656 prenatal children with Down's syndrome and 17 with cleft lip or

cleft palate were aborted in 2019 alone. Such a way of thinking, however, is not new. It resonates with the views which became popular at the beginning of the 20th century, especially in countries such as Germany, where many accepted the concept of a 'life unworthy of life'. This first appeared in the title of a 1920 book by psychiatrist Alfred Hoche and lawyer Karl Binding entitled *Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life*. As a result, making sure only certain people with quality lives are born through eugenics (good birth in Greek) as well as accepting that certain people with inferior or meaningless lives should die through euthanasia (good death in Greek) became increasingly acceptable.

At first, it was never questioned how

such a 'benevolent' view would affect society in general. It was only with the passing of time that its brutal and barbaric consequences were revealed. Indeed, since it was agreed, in principle, that some lives did not have any value or worth, it was seen as acceptable to terminate these lives even after birth. This was because it was assumed that such an act could not be considered as murder since these lives were not those of persons. For example, one of the leading American medical ethicists, Joseph Fletcher (1905-91), who was ordained as an Episcopal Christian priest but later identified himself as an atheist, was arguing in 1968 that: "People . . . have no reason to feel guilty about putting a Down's syndrome baby away, whether it's 'put away' in the

sense of hidden in a sanitarium or in a more responsible lethal sense. It is sad; yes. Dreadful. But it carries no guilt. True guilt arises only from an offence against a person, and a Down's is not a person."

Moreover, if it is possible to evaluate whether a life is unworthy of life, it is also necessary to be able to grade every life in society based on its quality and the amount of pleasure it brings. But this then means that every person's life becomes unequal in worth since those, for example, who are vulnerable and suffering may be seen as having less value. It may even imply that only the young, intelligent, successful, beautiful, strong and the happy may be considered as having a right to enjoy their lives.

If this happened, however, a civi-

lised society where everyone is equal in worth could not survive. The lives of the frail, the weak and those who believe they have a meaningless existence may then be considered of poor value or substandard and not something that should concern society to any degree. They may even be seen as a burden to society and deserving to be 'put away' in 'compassion' in order to 'cleanse' society of suffering. Of course, it may be argued that nothing should be done without respecting the autonomy of the individuals in question. But why should anyone care about the wishes of living human beings who have no worth? It is easy to see how such a conclusion can lead to the physical and psychological abuse and mistreatment of the most vulnerable.

It is also possible to ask who will decide about the worth of a life. It will certainly not be the weak and the defenceless. Instead, it is likely to be the strong and successful and those who may be in power. And this is already happening in the promotion of selective reproduction and euthanasia in parliament where it is necessary to believe in the principle that the value or worth of some human lives is of inferior quality or even meaningless.

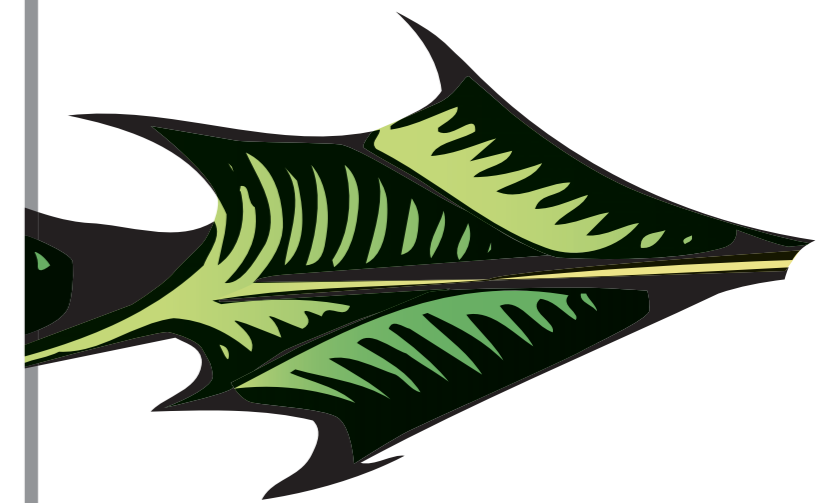
The only way to resist the dangerous and outspoken proposal that the worth of a life is merely based on its potential for enjoyment (which is increasingly influencing society) is to continue to believe in genuine compassion, solidarity and the absolute equality of all. Perception and humil-

ity also require a rejection of the assumption that past barbarities at the beginning of the 20th century 'cannot happen here', 'cannot happen again' or 'cannot happen to us'.
Calum MacKellar, Director of Research of the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics



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