

## WELLNESS AND DISABILITY

*"Nobody would be sitting here unless we accommodated what we're not able to do. We're not able to get up to this floor unless we build stairs, and when we – society – put(s) out those efforts to sort of assist, then disability doesn't exist."*

In this era of New Age ideas where organic food stores and yoga studios can be found in busy street corners and in office buildings, there seems to be a focus on health and wellness. Our Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Health and Wellness Consortium at Oregon Health & Science University is studying what *health and wellness* means to people with disabilities.

We have found that for people with disabilities, health and wellness presents a compounded challenge. When asked to define health and wellness, people in our study, all of whom are living with long-term disabilities such as cerebral palsy, post-polio, multiple sclerosis, amputation, and spinal cord injury, noted that it meant several things.

Health and wellness means being able to function and being given the chance to do what one wants to do; being independent; having self-determination regarding choices, opportunities, and activities; having physical and emotional states of well-being; and not being held back by pain.

When asked about wellness, one participant stated, *"At the end of the day, if I feel like I've accomplished something and been able to meet – not necessarily set goals – but things I felt were important to accomplish, then I feel like I had a well day."*

Our RRTC found that polio survivors, as well as other people living with disabilities, face not only the health and wellness issues that everyone faces but also some unique challenges that fluctuate based on individual abilities and the societal structure around them. One participant stated, *"...you still have to cope with health and wellness issues that you would if you're able-bodied. I still have periodontal disease. I still have a heart problem ... and (it's) in conjunction with other problems that are normally associated with spinal cord injury, you know, pain, infection, ability to do things."*

The participants identified personal attitudes and overall mental outlook as one of the key factors that deeply affects overall quality of health. Another individual noted, *"I think it (having a disability) does affect your self-image. It almost always starts out to be a negative experience. But, I think it can evolve into something that you're proud of – proud of your ability."* They also identified coping strategies, interacting with others with disabilities, participating in physical activity and exercise, working for pay or volunteering, and achieving personal goals as ways to promote and maintain personal wellness.

People in the study also stressed that community support and societal attitudes were vital to their health and wellness. These society-based, external factors

range from being able to enter a downtown bookstore or stay at a nice hotel to receiving financial relief for the added cost of living with a disability, such as tax credits for personal assistance services and equipment and improving insurance coverage for alternative medicine, specialists, and assistive technology.

Like most people, the persons in the study noted a desire to feel like they are valued and supported by family, friends, and health care providers.

Our RRTC on Health and Wellness recommends several strategies for meeting the health and wellness needs of polio survivors, as well as many other people living with disabilities. They include providing access to public facilities, expanding the definition of health for persons with disabilities, creating materials that would educate people with disabilities on how to maintain a healthy lifestyle, and providing training to health care providers about how to meet the needs of people with disabilities.

By taking these first steps, society can move forward in meeting the needs of *all* of its members. ■

**POST-POLIO DIRECTORY-2003** will be available after March 1, 2003. The *Directory* lists comprehensive clinics, knowledgeable health professionals, and support groups and is available online at [www.post-polio.org/ipn/locate.html](http://www.post-polio.org/ipn/locate.html).

Print copies are available for **\$8.00 USD** from International Polio Network. Individuals who have prepaid will receive their copies soon after March 1st.