# **Module 1: Supplementary Language We Use (English) and Disablism**

[Words in ***‘red’*** are for illustration, are offensive and should not be used] **People with disabilities:** For those who choose to call themselves this, disability is not separated from their impairment. They want to be seen as “**people first**”, as disability is seen as a ‘within person’ problem. They do not wish to be defined/confined by their impairment. **Although the oppressive and unequal treatment we are subjected to is viewed as a breach of our human rights, the clear transition to viewing disability as something rooted in society and other than our impairment has never occurred.** Without an understanding of **‘social model thinking’**, it is reasonable to see disability as negative and wish to distance oneself from it by, using ‘people first’.

Some impairment groups, like some of those with autism, cannot separate themselves from the identity with their condition and so reject the ‘people first’ epithet, preferring **Autistic People**. **Deaf people** (with a capital D) view themselves as a cultural minority group and community, users of **Sign Language** and also reject people first language.

However, people with **learning difficulties** or **learning disabilities**, as far back as the 1970s in Canada, rejected an imposed label such as **‘mental handicapped’** and wanted to be known as **People First**. Language can diminish or empower and what is acceptable to various disabled people changes over time. When in doubt, ask the disabled people how they wish to be known.

**Throughout history**, human physical and mental differences have been described in language and meaning which is based on the thinking of the day, reinforcing powerful stereotypes, which stretch down the years and still influence thinking about disabled people. ***‘Lame’***today is used by young people to mean something that is boring or un-cool from meaning not smart or unimpressive. In Shakespeare’s time it meant both having an injured foot/leg, make walking difficult and not strong, good or effective. Other words coming from Latin lamenta –weep and wail or lamia-witch, giving us lamentation, lament and ***‘lame-duck’***. **These words are negative. *‘Halt’*** was a word in common use, meaning the same as ***‘lame’***, as was ***‘cripple’*** also meaning to move slowly, to be permanently injured or have no power. **The polarity of good and evil, beautiful and unsightly is found right across all languages and is a major contributor to the devaluation of disabled people.**

## **Eugenics and language**

Following Darwin’s publication of The Origin of Species (1865), his cousin Frances Galton and many others thought they could speed up natural selection of human beings by stopping ***‘inferior’***people from having children. This Eugenics movement particularly focused on those they called ***‘feeble-minded’***, who could pass as part of the general population, but who carried the characteristics of mental deficiency, crime, immorality and destitution, which could be passed onto to their children. Most people with more significant mental impairments or labels: ***‘the mad’, ‘idiots’ and ‘imbeciles’*** were already by this time kept in asylums and the Workhouse; upper and middle class people in private small asylums. The Eugenicists such as Mary Dendy, worked ceaselessly in Manchester to separate the ***‘feeble minded’***from other children and adults, placing them in the home she opened in Sandleridge, Cheshire. In 1902, the Rev. Harold Nelson Burden, chaplain at Horfield Prison, and Katharine, his wife, founded the National Institutions for Persons Requiring Care and Control to care for ***‘mentally retarded’*** children and adults. These ideas spread throughout the British Empire and beyond and led to inhuman treatment, segregation, sterilisation and death to hundreds of thousands of disabled people.

**The origin of negative words associated with disability; to be avoided, use alternatives (provided):**

***‘Afflicted’***This implies that some higher being has cast a person down ('affligere' is Latin for to knock down, to weaken), or is causing them pain or suffering. **Use disabled person or (talking of specific impairment) person with.**..

***‘Cripple’*** The word comes from Old English crypel or creopel, both related to the verb 'to creep'. These come from old (Middle) German 'kripple' meaning to be without power. The word is extremely offensive. **Use disabled person.**

***‘Dumb or Dumbo’*** a) Not to be able to speak. This has come to be seen as negative from the days when profoundly deaf people were thought of as stupid because non-deaf people did not understand their communication systems. **Use a) disabled person or person with a speech impairment b) person with learning difficulties or disabilities.**

***‘Dwarf’***Through folklore and common usage, has negative connotations. **Use short person or person of short stature.**

***‘Feeble-minded’*** The word feeble comes from Old French meaning 'lacking strength' and, before that, from Latin flebilis, which meant 'to be lamented'. Its meaning was formalised in the Mental Deficiency Act 1913, indicating not an extremely pronounced mental deficiency, but one still requiring care, supervision, and control. **Use person with learning difficulties**.

***‘Freak’*** Different. From ***‘Freak Show’*** when in the past people paid money to look and laugh at disabled people. **Use disabled person.**

***‘Handicapped’*** Having an imposed disadvantage. The word may have several origins: a) horse races round the streets of Italian City States. The best riders had to ride one-handed, holding their hat in the other to make the race more equal b) penitent sinners (often disabled people) in Europe who were forced into begging to survive and had to go to people 'cap in hand' c) C17th game called 'cap i' hand'. Players showed they accepted or rejected a disputed object's valuation by bringing their hands either full or empty out of a cap in which forfeit money had been placed. This practice was used in C18th to show whether people agreed to a horse carrying extra weight in a race (i.e. deliberately giving it a disadvantage). Offensive. **Use disabled person**.

***‘Idiot’*** Dates from C13th and comes from the Latin word idiota, meaning 'ignorant person'. Again, it featured in the Mental Deficiency Act 1913 (see ‘Feebleminded’), where it denoted someone who was so mentally deficient that they should be detained for the whole of their lives. Highly offensive. **Use person with learning difficulties.**

***‘Imbecile’*** From C16th century and originating from the Latin, ‘imbecillus’, meaning 'feeble' (literally meant 'without support', originally used mainly in a physical sense). It was defined in the Mental Deficiency Act as someone incapable of managing their own affairs. Highly offensive. **Use person with learning difficulties**.

***‘Invalid’***literally means not valid, from Latin 'invalidus'. In C17th it came to have a specific meaning, when referring to people as infirm or disabled. Offensive. **Use disabled person**.

***‘Mental’***, ***‘nutter’****,* ***‘mad’****,* ***or ‘crazy’***are informal (slang) words for people with mental health issues. One in four people have a major bout of mental distress or become mental health system users. The vast majority are not dangerous. Offensive. **Use mental health system user or survivor.**

**‘*Mentally handicapped’***: In the UK, over 130,000 people with learning difficulties were locked away in Mental Handicap Hospitals because tests showed they had low Intelligence Quotients (IQ). These tests have since been shown to be culturally biased and only to measure one small part of how the brain works. They have chosen the name **“people with learning difficulties”** for themselves because they think that through education, which they have largely been denied, they can improve their situation***.***

***‘Mong /Mongolian’***: Langdon Down was a doctor who worked at the London Hospital in Whitechapel in the 1860s. He noticed that around 1 in 800 babies were born with pronounced different features and capabilities. Their features reminded him of the Mongolian people. He postulated that there was a hierarchy of races (in descending order) - European, Asian, African and Mongols. Each was genetically inferior to the group above them. **This was a racist theory.** Extremely offensive. **Use person with learning difficulty or person with Down’s syndrome.**

***‘Moron(ic)’,*** Greek, meaning ‘foolish, dull, sluggish’. Offensive. **Use person with learning difficulties.**

***‘Retard’***: Still in common use in the USA for people with learning difficulties; from retarded or held back in development. Offensive. On October 5, 2010, U.S. President Barack Obama signed bill S. 2781 into federal law. Rosa’s Law removes the terms ***“mental******retardation”***and ***"mentally retarded"*** from Federal health, education and labour policy and replaces them with **individual or person with intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties or learning disabled people.**

***‘Spaz’, ‘spazzie’ or ‘spastic’***: People with cerebral palsy are subject to muscle spasms or spasticity. These offensive words used to describe or used just as an insult. **Use people with cerebral palsy or disabled people**.

***‘Stupid’*** Used in America at the start of C20th ‘scientifically’ to denote ‘one deficient in judgment and sense’. **Do not use.**

***‘The blind’, ‘The deaf’, ‘The disabled’*** To call any group of people 'the' anything is to dehumanise them. **Use blind people, deaf people or disabled people.** Often our impairments are used as a metaphor. Statements like ***“are you blind?”, “are you deaf?”*** and ***”that’s lame”*** all have connections to negative descriptions of disability and certainly aren’t meant kindly.

***‘Victim’ or ‘sufferer’***: **Disabled people are not victims of their impairment**. This implies they are consciously singled out for punishment by God or a higher being. Similarly with the word ***‘sufferer’****.* **Use disabled person or person with chronic pain**.

***‘Wheelchair-bound’***: Wheelchair users see their wheelchair as a means of mobility and freedom, not something that restricts them, apart from problems with lack of access. **Use wheelchair user**.

Changing the language to words like ***‘differently abled’ or ‘special’*** was thought to get rid of the stigma attached to negative language. **As it is the disabled person who is stigmatised, changing the label does not change the behaviour. For this reason, there is no mention of ‘special’ in the UNCRPD.**

## **During the COVID -19 Pandemic and language**

Governments and the media have almost universally come to call disabled people with underlying conditions such as weak immune systems, diabetic, learning difficulty or dementia as ***‘vulnerable’*** or ***‘clinically vulnerable’.*** Disabled people are at **higher risk** of contracting and dying of the virus, particularly when living in a segregated institution such as a group home, old people’s home or long stay hospital. But that should mean for Governments respecting our rights, extra measures need to be in place to minimise the risk of infection. This did not happen and where we have statistics, disabled people have been subjected to a disproportionate death rate compared to the rest of the population.

## **The language the CDPF uses**

**Disabled people:** Why we still choose to call ourselves ‘disabled people’: In the Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum (CDPF) we call ourselves ‘**disabled people’** because of the development of the **‘social model of disability’.** In the C19th and C20th, a disabled person’s medical condition was thought to be the root cause of their exclusion from society, an approach now referred to as the **‘medical or individual model’** of disability. We use the **‘social model of disability’,** where the barriers of environment, attitude and organisation are what disable people with impairments and lead to prejudice and discrimination.So, to call ourselves ‘persons with disabilities’ is to accept that we are objects and powerless.We also view ourselves as united by a common oppression so are proud to identify as ‘**disabled people’** rather than **‘people with disabilities’. When we are talking about the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** we will use **‘people or persons with disabilities’.**

***Follow up Activity***

***List 10 words you find offensive used to describe disabled people. For each word explain in writing its origin and why it is offensive to disabled people.***