

Introduction to special issue

Spinal Cord Injury and Vocational Rehabilitation

Our world seems to be changing at a “break neck” pace, and research is allowing us to perceive the world in a different fashion almost moment to moment. Unfortunately, among the few constants in this world is that, given time, many of us will have to deal with a disability. In January of 1965, I became extremely interested in the employment opportunities for persons with Spinal Cord Injuries – as a result of a sledding accident, I became one myself!! In 1972, I got my first “real” job as an instructor in a “Job Seeking Skills” program that included several other persons with SCI. My career fortunately advanced as I became a counselor, a trainer, and an administrator in a wide array of disability programs that always included, as a significant subset at least, employment initiatives for persons with SCI. Now in 2006, I am starting my fifth year as Virginia’s Commissioner of the Department of Rehabilitative Services. It is hard to believe how much I have learned since in 1965 when one day during “rehab” I was asked by one of my roommates:

“Hey Jim, are you a ‘paraplegic’?” To which I replied: “No, I’m a Baptist.”

But over the last four decades, I have learned a few things and witnessed many more.

This special edition of *The Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* is offered to help us all gain a better perspective on how a Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) impacts a person, as well as the network of others around him/her, and to establish what our systems and our society can do to better respond. The manner in which we as professionals respond can lessen what in many times in our history has been a devastating occurrence, and we can look to family members to help us as an invaluable asset *if* we are in tune to their needs.

There is an emerging school of thought that fully demands that disability is a normal stage in life that

should and can be dealt with not only by the individual affected, but moreover by society. For more on this, you are encouraged to go to the following site: <http://www.disabilityisnatural.com/>.

One of the central themes found here is that people with disabilities, including SCI, have a great deal in common with non-disabled persons. But where have we, as a society, learned about what a SCI does to an individual?

To a large extent, our collective thoughts and assumptions about what living with a SCI is like have been based on the experiences we have witnessed through “super” men and women. From Raymond Burr, the amazing paralyzed police chief, in “Iron-sides,” to Joni Earickson Tada, a spiritual inspiration to many; from John Hockenberry covering the Gulf War from a wheelchair to Teddy Pendergrass still crooning after SCI; and particularly from the recent heroism and grace demonstrated by Christopher Reeve as the end of life approached; society sees some of the issues that persons with SCI deal with on a daily basis. We have been witness to these individuals’ achievements, but normal, everyday, “non-super” persons with disabilities who share so much in common with their non-disabled, “normal” neighbors have not equally impacted us. Most persons with SCI are not that interested in catching the bad guy, covering a war, or selling a million records. Most are more interested in catching a movie at the Cineplex, having a good meal, participating with peers in some athletic or social event, finding a soul mate, and hopefully getting a job that, if they are lucky, will evolve into a career. We all need work, and the following articles clearly demonstrate the value of work, particularly for persons with SCI.

BUT still, study after study shows that *we* – persons with SCI – are not perceived as WORKERS. Work is a critical element of the success that all people can re-

alize and is essential for one's positive identity. Have you ever tried to introduce yourself at a social gathering without stating what you do for a living? From Sigmund Freud to Studs Terkel, we have seen repeatedly that work is critical to our being. The following articles further demonstrate that for persons with SCI, work not only brings a positive identity, but can bring benefits that are critical elements of physical health and a social network that increases the family's stability and health.

We are now at a point where research and technology have allowed us to look towards the day when a significant SCI can almost be "cured," and if not, each day we get closer to technologies that ameliorate many of the problems that accompany SCI. We have come a long way, but have such a long way to go.

This is an important issue of *The Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*. In it is a series of articles that help us better understand what we as professionals and members of our society can do. We as professionals and as members of our society have a lot to learn about the impact of Spinal Cord Injury. Thankfully not as much as I, back in the 60's, when I did not know the difference between a "Baptist" and a "paraplegic".

This *Journal* affords us the opportunity to learn and as a result do better.

James Rothrock
Commissioner

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