

## Labelling disabling

Lydia Pawlenko

They arrived in wheelchairs, accompanied by seeing-eye dogs or were dependent on a monitor translating proceedings into hand signals, but the mood at the "Labelled Disabled" Conference was anything but passive.

The participants in the various panels, discussions and workshops held by York's Centre For Handicapped Students over the past three weeks, made clear that they were ready to fight the labels they have been assigned by society, which have often deprived them of fulfillment in their individual needs.

When one workshop participant rather timidly asked whether one of the self-help groups was being "a bit too militant" in its tactics, she was met with groans of disbelief. Not only are these people tired of being labelled like "cans of paint in a hardware store" by service agencies, they also refuse to have their outcries ignored and, as one speaker put it, "shoved to the back of 'lifestyle' sections of newspapers."

"As disabled people, we are the experts," affirmed a member of BOOST (Blind Organization of Ontario with Self-Help Tactics). "The time has come for agencies to operate in our way," she exclaimed, and the crowd gathered in one of the Curtis Lecture Halls burst into wild applause.

Speaking in a panel discussion on "Service providers" on March 17, Audrey King of the Ontario Crippled Children's Centre, mentioned that various service

providers operate "under their own label of expertise," thereby putting the disabled under the assumption that they are in a lower category.

"When you get frustrated with an agency, it is usually with an individual," she said. King spoke of the problem of there being so much pressure to fund an operation, thus perpetuating the labelling and code numbering of humans. "All the time the administrators are going to be pushing for efficient cost and production. On the other hand, if you had an institution that didn't have to be economical, you would have total chaos," she said.

Perhaps the most strongly attacked was David Pitt, of the Ministry of Community and Social Services. His explanation of the Ministry's efforts to push into a new direction for subsidized housing for the disabled, was dismissed as next to fictional by the bitter and angry participants. Only 58 people in Ontario are living outside the hospital in subsidized housing. This represents only 10 per cent of the need.

One woman in the audience, who was diagnosed as having chronic back pain by her doctor, was not labelled in the appropriate category to be eligible for a subsidized apartment. Instead, she was confined to a hospital for the chronically ill, paying \$10 a day for OHIP costs. "The \$10 a day for OHIP costs is to provide you with a counter-irritant to the chronic pain," commented panel moderator Warner Troyer.



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