

MEDIA RELEASE

March 2013

Intellectual Disability Awareness Month – for release on the 25 March 2013

INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY CAN AFFECT YOU TOO

Of every thousand people living in the Western Cape (and our population is over 5 million) 25 have an IQ between 50 and 80. Yet not nearly enough is known about intellectual disability.

People respond very differently to the words 'intellectual disability' – some regard intellectual disability as a curse or a tragedy, while others are confused about what it means and what the causes are.

Intellectual disability refers to a disability that limits the way a person's brain functions and learns, along with the ability to adapt or relate to the surrounding world to the same extent as others. It is usually diagnosed before the age of 18 and is life long. It can affect *anyone*: any mother can give birth to a baby with intellectual disability, or any person could have a brain injury as a result of an accident on the road, in sport or even at home.

The extent of intellectual disability can vary greatly between individuals, from mild to severe or profound, and may or may not be accompanied by other physical conditions. In some cases a person may be unable to walk, talk or feed themselves, and is completely reliant on care workers to tend to their every need.

But some people with intellectual disability are able to communicate, engage in social activities and participate in community life, with little additional assistance or intervention. As with any individual, people with intellectual disability are capable of acquiring many skills and achieving many accomplishments; they simply need the opportunity to be included in society in order to make their own, unique, contributions.

March is nationally recognised as Intellectual Disability Awareness Month. ***Cape Mental Health***, an affiliate of the ***South African Federation for Mental Health***, has launched an awareness programme which is aimed at prevention and education, with a particular focus on youth and intellectual disability. If we target our youth (the next generation), and equip

them with the necessary information on intellectual disability, we can 'sensitise' them to issues of stigma, discrimination and inclusion. Our youth can be the catalysts for change, by passing on vital information to their peers, families and the community at large.

The March campaign calls for the Human Rights of all people with intellectual disability. All persons deserve equal rights and respect; all persons should be free from unfair discrimination, unequal treatment, abuse and exploitation.

Kyle, a 23-year-old young man, attends Cape Mental Health's Eagles Skills Training and Day Care Programme for adults with severe and profound intellectual disability. Currently no provision is made for services to young adults like Kyle. Prior to Cape Mental Health opening this centre, Kyle spent his days at home living a cloistered life. Fortunately he now has access to a programme where he receives intensive assistance with personal care, skills training, stimulation and social interaction. Over the years Cape Mental Health has pioneered services in response to the gaps in service delivery by government departments and, with sufficient funding, plans to duplicate the Eagles programme in other communities.

There are different degrees of intellectual disability (mild, moderate, severe and profound) and also different causes – in fact, over 200 possible causes have been identified. In some cases, there is no apparent reason for the disability. Other times, however, intellectual disability *can be prevented*, as is the case with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome which is totally preventable. It is of crucial importance for young people and parents-to-be to understand the damage that the use of alcohol and drugs during pregnancy can have on the foetus.

Lindiwe Shayi, mother of two boys, one born with intellectual disability 11 years ago says:
"I had complications in my pregnancy around 20 weeks and that's when they found out that our precious little Jabu had Down syndrome. My first reaction was that of shock, fear and great confusion. I kept thinking 'why me?' 'Have I done anything wrong to have caused it?' We decided that we would go ahead with the pregnancy, regardless of what the severity of the disability may be."

Lindiwe explains, "It is vital to educate yourself on the type of disability your child has. Acceptance is the first step for you as a parent. As much as we believe in integrating our child in mainstream life, Jabu goes to a special school as this is best for him. We take him

out whenever we can and let him live as normal a life as possible. There is no disability in our home – only love and respect for one another.”

For most of us, living a 'normal' life is something we take for granted. We grow up, go to school, graduate and start a career and hardly ever give a second thought to those who are unable to do just that. Cape Mental Health calls on you to make a difference this month by respecting the rights of those living with intellectual disability to enjoy a life of dignity, inclusion in all the privileges and opportunities afforded by our society to the others, and opportunities to develop their abilities to their full potential.

Cape Mental Health is the oldest Mental Health Society in South Africa celebrates 100 years of service excellence to persons with mental disability in the Western Cape.

For more details on Cape Mental Health, visit www.capementalhealth.co.za or contact the organisation at 021 447 9040 / info@cmhs.co.za.

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Issued by Cape Mental Health