

Reviewing Benefits and Barriers Associated with the Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Sport, Exercise, Physical and Leisure Activities

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Abstract: *In life barriers to participation in sport and physical activity tend to exist and affect all people i.e. able bodied as well as those living with disabilities. However people with disabilities often experience additional barriers to those experienced by their non disabled counterparts. It is also commonly believed that disabled people can benefit from participating in sport, exercise physical and leisure activities just like their non disabled counterparts. This article reviews, analyses and discusses the critical benefits which persons with disabilities can accrue from participating in sport, exercise, physical and leisure activities. The paper proceeds to review the critical barriers that tend to impede persons with disabilities from participating in these activities and hence prevent them from accruing the envisaged benefits. The paper projects forward by suggesting solutions to the barriers in order to enhance, promote and motivate the involvement and participation of persons with a disability in sport, exercise and leisure activities.*

Keywords: Benefits and barriers, persons with disabilities, sport and exercise, physical and leisure activities

1. Introduction

It is important for all people including people with disabilities (PWD) to be aware of and be more knowledgeable about the specific effects of both physical activity and inactivity. For all human beings the benefits of participating in sport, exercise, physical and leisure activities are immense and can never be overemphasised. Simply stated engaging in sport, exercise, leisure and physical activity is associated with significant health benefits [1,2,3]. However it is important to recognize that engaging in physical activity is not as simple as it sounds. This is possibly the reason why in spite of some understanding of the benefits of participating in sport and physical activities some people still refrain from exercising. One of the simple reasons is that there are numerous significant barriers that prevent people from engaging in physical activity and exercise [4, 5, 7] most of which are beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say that all people experience barriers to participating in physical activity but disabled persons often experience and endure unique and additional barriers in their quest to participate in sport, exercise, physical and leisure activities.

2. The impact of sport, exercise, physical and leisure activities on the physical health and wellbeing of people with disabilities

Sport exercise, physical and leisure activities have the potential to reduce the risk of lifestyle or non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and conditions such as stress, anxiety and depression. Sport and Physical activity are also believed to help prevent and reduce hypertension, control body weight, prevent and control osteoporosis and help manage chronic pain [1,2,3].

Physical inactivity or disuse of the human body is associated with undesirable healthy risks; it is believed to lead to premature ageing chronic disease and other numerous impairments such as cardio-vascular vulnerability and musculoskeletal fragility [8]. As [9] argues, "If some of the benefits accruing from physical exercise could be procured by any one medicine, then nothing in the world would be held in more esteem than that medicine."

Regular participating in sport enables people to work harder, longer and with less effort and there is a reduced sense of effort for any given task. This is true for everyone and for all age groups [8]. Physical fitness which is a direct derivative of sport, exercise and physical activity is particularly important in the face of periods of immobilisation, hospitalisation or serious health problems. It contributes to the maintenance of functioning and prevents the development of new functional limitations [8]. Being overweight particularly in people with mobility impairments can affect their functional ability and independence and increase the likelihood of them developing associated complications. Thus sport and physical activity can be important in maintaining health and simultaneously and indirectly promoting financial savings in terms of healthy costs.

Each component of physical fitness including balance, coordination, muscle strength, reaction time, visual acuity, power, body composition, cardiovascular and muscular endurance can be defined on a continuum ranging from low to high fitness levels. According to [10] the question of what constitute an adequate level of intensity and duration of exercise to achieve therapeutic benefits from exercise remains a subject of constant debate." However it is generally accepted that moderate physical activity such as

brisk walking or its equivalent for thirty minutes most days of the week will improve the health and quality of life [4]. Larger health status differences among people with disabilities have been noted between exercise and non-exercisers compared to their non-disabled counterparts. The health status differences between people with and without disabilities have been shown to be smaller for people who exercise [8]. The suggested relationship between physical activity and health status among people with disabilities should be further tested and explored [8].

Some people with disabilities can be less active due to their functional limitations. Expectations of inactivity on their own part and that of others may compound their functional limitations. Attitudinal, social and physical access barriers as well as the prevailing trend to live a sedentary lifestyle may also increase the likelihood of physical inactivity in disabled people [11]. Inactivity can exacerbate conditions that people with disabilities have and can precipitate secondary conditions to which they are prone such as kidney failure, obesity and so on. Inactivity can also lead to an increase in dependence on others, a decrease in social interactions and the development of symptoms such as fatigue, depression, low functional capacity, obesity and pressure sores. Physically active wheelchair users have a lower rate of absence from work and fewer hospital admissions than their inactive colleagues [11]. Wheelchair athletes have fewer pressure sores and kidney complications than sedentary wheelchair users [11]. Exercise in the upright position reduces calcium loss after a spinal cord injury and exercise that improves muscle strength bring confidence in negotiating steps and other barriers [11]. Both motor skills and the speed at which manual work is performed have been proved to improve in people with intellectual impairment who exercise [8].

The positive effects of physical activity in persons with learning, physical and sensory disabilities include improvements in general health, physical fitness, bone metabolism and increased functional independence [4]. There is also increased mobility and a reduction in chronic disease and secondary complications. Physical activity also has a mitigating effect on challenging behaviour (Wasburn et al and Nary et al cited by [4])

3. The impact of sport, exercise physical and leisure activities on Sociological and Psychological wellbeing of people with disabilities

The benefits of participating in sport, exercise, physical and leisure activities do not amount simply to public health concerns of increasing physical fitness for persons with disabilities. It also has potential psychological benefits in terms of the sense of empowerment and self efficacy achievable through participation, as well as possible improved sense of body consciousness [12]. In terms of social relationships, sport has enormous capacity to unite people and to increase their quality of life. It has knock-on benefits for those close to disabled people who may not necessarily be disabled themselves. For example participation in sport by their children has been proved to decrease the

stress levels in parents with children who are disabled [6]. Through sport, physical and leisure activities people establish friendship and social networks from which collective identities can be forged [6].

Participation in sport with diverse others can help overcome prejudice and discrimination (on the ground of ethnicity, social background or disability for example) and can play a role in achieving an inclusive society. Through sport people usually learn the tenets of fair play, team work, solidarity and can become more aware of the problems that exist for people with disabilities. For PWD participating in sport and physical exercise can help them come to terms with their disability, regain self-esteem and social integration [13]. People with learning difficulties appear to gain significant mental, social and spiritual benefits from sport and leisure activities [13]. [14] Reviewed studies have demonstrated the importance of social participation for the development of self-concept, self-esteem, self regard and self worth of persons with intellectual disabilities.

[6] Found that along with the importance of perceived functional skills and anatomy, persons with developmental disabilities reported a consistent desire for more friends. [14] conducted research whose empirical findings support and encourage the development of theoretical models of how particular physical activity programs can effect psychological and behavioural change beyond improving physical fitness.

4. Barriers impeding the participation of persons with disabilities in sport, exercise, physical and leisure activities

[6] found that less than 10% of African-American women with disabilities participated in the Paralympic Games. They cite other studies carried out by Coyle and Santiago (1995), Painter and Blackburn (1988) and Santiago, Coyle and Kinney (1993) which also concluded that participation in sports was a missing component in the lives of many people with disabilities. In a study by Sands et al in [9], 80% of people with disabilities had not attended any Paralympics event in the past year. In the same study 71% of people with disabilities had not attended any other sporting event in the past year compared to only 43% of people without disabilities. [15] reports of a survey carried out on a section of the adult Irish population in November 1994, which showed that non-disabled respondents were more likely to engage in sports than respondents with disabilities and that sports avoidance was twice as frequent among people with disabilities. All the studies cited above suggest unacceptably low levels of sport, exercise, physical and leisure participation by people with disabilities and hence the existence of barriers to participation.

[5] agrees that there is generally a lower level of participation in sports amongst physically disabled people. One reason suggested for the lower level of participation is that as sport becomes increasingly regarded as a commodity, disabled people are under threat of exclusion if they cannot find a way to fit into the consumer model [16]. This "corporatization" of sport and the contemporary obsession

with elite sport stars means that if the disabled people cannot reasonably aspire to take part in competitive or even elite sport they may be frozen out of the action. It is not enough to want to take part in sports; you have to be a potential sports star. [6] argue that this focus is invariably upon who is able, or who is more suited to taking part in sport. This creates a situation where many young people are discriminated against on the ground of their bodily performances rather than upon their willingness to take part. Such discrimination may result in persons with disabilities shunning sports activities.

A study carried out by the Market Research Bureau of Scotland found out that people with disabilities were significantly more restricted in their social life and in getting out and about than non disabled people [4]. Taking no exercise was found to be twice as frequent among people with disability. The results of the above study point to accessibility problems rather than health issues as important factors in restricting social participation. In this study about thirty percent of disabled people who could not use public transport said it was because they could not get from their home to the bus stop or access point. Another thirty percent said it was because they could not physically get on the bus or train [13].

Contact a Family, a United Kingdom based organisation, carried out a survey in the UK of disabled families' experiences of play and leisure [4]. The survey showed that disabled families faced many barriers to participation and were put off even attempting to use many leisure facilities. Public attitudes and practicalities such as long queues and inaccessible transport put parents and children off. When families did try to use leisure facilities they often encountered rigid rules and obstacles mainly due to the attitudes of providers and staff at all levels. This was true for children with all kinds of disabilities, physical learning and sensory [4].

Evaluation of accessibility shows that there are substantial barriers that impede wheelchair users from undertaking physical activity and thus, sport participation [4]. In Kansas for example it was found that most facilities still had at least one barrier that would impede those with physical disability from using the facility (Nary et al 2000 cited by [4]). For persons with learning disability, barriers to undertaking physical activity include: unclear policy guidelines in residential and day centre facilities, resourcing, staffing, transport constraints and limited options for physically active community leisure ([5] Cited by [4]). [17] Also flags the fact that choice for many people with disabilities is not facilitated and so they sometimes cannot chose an active lifestyle.

5. Recommendations

In order to promote the participation of disabled people in sport, exercise physical and leisure activities it is recommended that, Government and non-governmental organizations should mobilize more resources which can be used to provide the necessary facilities equipment and assistive devices for people with a disability. Governments should enact laws and policies which safeguard the rights of

people with disabilities. Government agencies and disability rights advocates should intensify awareness on the rights of PWD and importance of their participation in sport, exercise physical and leisure activities in order to change the negative attitudes of the able bodied people. The relevant local authorities should construct new and modify existing facilities and structures to make them user friendly for the disabled people. Sport, exercise, physical and leisure activity organisers should ensure that PWD are included in the local organizing committees of these activities to in order understand the needs of the disabled people more and hence fulfil the aphorism, "Nothing for us without us" This will help to make participation by PWD meaningful and sustainable. More leisure and physical activity options should be provided so that persons with disability can have the luxury to choose those best suited for them.

It was noted that most of the studies on the participation of persons with a disability in sport, exercise, leisure and physical activities have been carried out in developed countries [18]. It is therefore recommended that more studies of a similar nature be carried out in less developed countries like Zimbabwe. In addition the suggested relationship between physical activity and health status among people with disabilities should be further tested and explored [8].

6. Conclusion

It can be concluded from the above review that people with a disability stand to benefit significantly by participating in sport, exercise, physical and leisure activities. The benefits they accrue include social, physiological and psychological benefits. It is also apparent that people with a disability experience many barriers which impede their effective participation in sport, exercise and leisure activities. The major barriers range from lack of appropriate facilities which reduce access, attitude problems, unfriendly policies and many others. It is imperative that an integrated approach be adopted to promote the participation of PWD in sport, exercise, physical and leisure activities in order to make their life worthwhile.

'The authors declare that they have no competing interests'

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