

UN to decide what "disability" means

An intriguing comment on what we mean when we talk of a disability appears in *The Lancet* of October 7. We are assured that the United Nations General Assembly will shortly consider the precise definition that should be applied to the term. The outcome will affect the treatment that must be awarded to individuals who are pronounced disabled. This will mean increased attention to non-fatal health outcomes, including the onslaught of the ageing process.

A definition of disability should be applicable to all people, without segregation into groups such as "the visually impaired".

Comparisons need to be made of severity across different types of disability, recognising the effect of environment on their degree. Stipulations about the cause of the condition should not be involved in the definition.

The current definition includes long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers in living may hinder full and effective participation in society. The proposed new definition means difficulty at the levels of body, person or society in one or more domains of life experienced by an individual whose health condition interacts with factors

existing in social living. Only on such a basis can the concept of disability be accepted.

It is noteworthy that whatever a person's health problems may be from the medical angle, the feature of his or her immediate environment must also be taken into account. Disability is therefore a state of decreased functioning that is associated with disease, disorder, injury or other health condition, which in the context of one's environment is experienced as impairment, limitation of activity or restriction in social participation. Unless fully recognised, no remedy is possible.

Palaeoanthropologists excited by finding of a young human ancestor

Great interest has been aroused among palaeoanthropologists by recent reports regarding the skeleton of a three-year-old girl discovered in Ethiopia. She was buried some 3.3 million years ago by a local flood.

The find is unique in that at least half the skeleton is preserved, including a cast of the whole skull, face and brain. The skeleton must have been rolled into a ball by the flood before being buried in sand shortly after death before the bones could be weathered or torn by predators. Among the structures identified in the find have been shoulder

blades, collarbones, ribs, spinal column, humerus, fingers, kneecaps, thigh and shinbones from both legs and an almost complete foot.

When the remains were discovered at Dikita, only some 10km from the spot where the now famous "Lucy" was unearthed in 1974, they were attributed to the same species, *Australopithecus afarensis*.

Arguments continue over whether the child could have walked on feet and also climbed trees when necessary, but the evidence suggests that she did both. The

estimated brain size of 330cc indicates slower brain growth than in chimpanzees.

The hyoid bone of the throat suggests the possibility of air sacs in the neck. In the absence of large canines there are indications that air sacs may have provided a way by which the males of the species established a hierarchal dominance and females were able to assess the quality of a potential mate. The resemblance of the hyoid bone to that of an ape indicates that the Dikita people had not yet evolved the power of speech to any extent.

Oldest writing in the New World is discovered

In the 15 September issue of *Science* there is an account of the finding of what is claimed by the experts to be the oldest example of writing so far discovered in the New World. It was on a stone block quarried by road builders from an ancient mound at Cascajal, outside San Lorenzo in Mexico.

The writing has been associated with pottery fragments and figurines attributed to the Olmec people, and was calculated to date from before 900BC. There were 62 distinct signs represented, made with a blunted blade to form outlines and a sharper one for cuts within the signs.

The Olmec civilisation appeared on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in about 1200BC and rapidly flourished because the local soils were rich and the rainfall high, so that intensive production of maize was possible. The first centre at Tenochtitlán was abandoned and another arose, but by 400BC the Olmec culture had largely disappeared. Nevertheless, it exerted a great influence on later Mexican cultures.

It is agreed that the carved glyphs on the Cascajal block are real writing. A few of the signs are repeated and there are short and repeated sequences. The text runs horizontally rather than vertically as in later Mesoamerican



scripts, and there seems to be no connection with a later writing system known as Isthmian. The message is so far undeciphered, and further work in the vicinity of the find needs to be undertaken.

And I quote . . .

Tricky problem of fanatics

"Fanatics are not just stern moralists, they are obsessive ones who forget all but one part of the moral scene. They see no need to respect ideals that conflict between their chosen ones, or to work out a reconciliation between them. This frame of mind is not, of course, peculiar to full-time fanatics. It is easy to fall into it whenever one is, for the moment, completely absorbed in some good cause, and good causes often do seem to demand that kind of absorption." — Mary Midgley, 'The myths we live by' (2003).

Essential human freedoms

"We look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way — everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want. The fourth is freedom from fear." — Franklin D. Roosevelt, US president (1941).