

AHS Speaker Series left positive impression

The History of Disability by Geoffrey Reaume, PhD, U of T., spoke at the Hillary House in Aurora, on January 24.

The evening was one of the speaker events for the year at the Hillary House.

The discussion started by referring to ancient times when dwarfs or hunchbacks were considered a 'Curse from God' in 3 BC. In 5th C BC, small people were illustrated on vases. The crippled, blinded or mad were stigmatized as deviant in society. People with leprosy were taken away to live in a camp, away from a city.

The difference between a disability and a sickness was made in a discussion. It was noted that a disability had a neurological reason for the condition. But madness was considered to come from the moon in the old ages up to the 1700's as well.

In 1630, in London, England, disabled ran away from the city. They were scapegoats for society's ills. Jews were also labelled as misfits and considered deviants in society as well.

There were several types of disabilities listed in the power point lecture. There were: Fools. Natural, Mad, Crippled and Artificial.

The Artificial disabled group were people that dressed up as a fool in public.

In Canada, the US and in Europe, freak shows were common right up to the late 1960's. In 1932 there was the movie of The Freaks.

Back in 1890, John Merrick, was called the 'Elephant Man', due to his disfigured body and face. The Siamese Twins were also a well-documented example of disabled people living in a social setting.

There was the rise of public asylums in the 19 Century in North America. Interestingly, they were segregated not only by sex; but also by race, white or black.

When immigrants migrated into the USA, in 1917, at Ellis Island, they were screened for disabilities. The people considered being unacceptable and or disabled for immigration were marked with an 'X' on their lapel of their jacket. Cross these people off the list, eliminate them from entry into the country. The people who failed the test for entry into the US were detained in a special room for deportation. It was nicknamed the 'psychopathic ward'.

In Canada, the Hiawatha Asylum for the insane was created in 1930. There were 350 Indigenous people confined in this institution for practicing their cultural traditions. Abuse (physical and psychological) was so bad that the government had to step in fairly soon and close the facility.

In Ontario, a Provincial Lunatic Asylum was built in 1868, but was torn down in 1970. It was originally built at Queen and Ossington, 3 miles out of the city at that time.

In 1872, the first School for the Blind was established in Bradford.

There were some social movements in North America to improve the lives of the disabled. In the 1930's, the March of Dimes developed publicity campaigns for the disabled in Canada.

Public awareness of the disabled was boosted. There was a more positive image of children with disabilities shown in public spaces.

In the past, the disabled often had to beg for money so they could live. They sought out charities for financial and social assistance.

For example, a woman in 1916, begged for money with a sign tied around her neck saying 'blind women?'. Now, there have been some government benefits and programs to help the disabled population. The Disability Tax Credit is a good example.

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