MEDICAL VS SOCIAL MODEL
FACTSHEET

Institution of
MECHANICAL
ENGINEERS

Improving the world through engineering

MEDICAL VS SOCIAL MODEL

Introduction

What really disables a person? The traditional way of thinking is that a person is disabled by their disability, but is that really the end of it? No. A person's potential is not limited by their disability but by the societal norms that exclude the thought of them, and the individuals need.

These two ways of thinking about this is called the medical and social model. The medical model holds society back. Here's how the two models stack up against each other:

Medical Model

In the medical model the disabled person is the problem. The thought is that the disability is something that must be cured/augmented, or the person must change to fit what is 'normal'; if they fail to meet societies expectations of normal, then they are seen as someone who is a 'lost cause' or someone who's 'not trying hard enough'.

In this model the person is labelled as their disability and because of this the disability becomes the focus and the person is forgotten about.

Often, the person with the disability is not given the chance to build skills, reach for their aspirations or potential or really experience life.

Social Model

The social model looks at how we can build a better society that is more inclusive. This model looks at society as the problem and that the person is disabled by their environment.

If you pay attention to things around you this is made obvious; buildings are unfriendly with no alternatives to stairs, slim corridors limit movement, signs stay available only to those who can see them, and places publicly play loud music and flash bright lights.

The attitude of those who look at people with disability may also limit them, some people will look at someone without a visible disability and judge them as lazy or incapable or less able than others. Organisations also tend adopt procedures and quotas that makes it impossible for some to flourish.

Ways To Support The Social Model

- Throw away your prejudice
- Advocate for change
- Get involved in movements and petitions
- Look at someone for the person they are not for how different they are
- Don't exclude people with disability

With this people can be valued for who they are and what they can do and not be held back by what they might not be able to do. If we all help the social model, then society can evolve and change for the better.

Keen To Learn More?

Do an online search of 'disability medical vs social model' and see what interesting articles, podcasts, videos and websites you can find to help enhance your knowledge and confidence in talking about this topic with your team and peers.