What is the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities?

This United Nations convention, known as the 'Disability Convention', is about the human rights of disabled people.

What are human rights?

These are the basic rights and freedoms belonging to all people – to be treated fairly and equally, with respect and dignity. Human rights are also about how a government ought to treat its people. Such rights ensure that all people can:

- be safe and protected from hurt
- make their own decisions
- have a good life
- be involved in their community and society.

Human Rights Commission
Te Kāhui Tika Tangata

What is the Disability Convention?

All over the world, disabled people do not have the same access to human rights that other people do. The Disability Convention is a worldwide human rights agreement. It makes the human rights of disabled people clearer.

The convention does not give disabled people new human rights. It makes clear that they have the same rights as everyone else. It tells governments how to remove barriers and make sure disabled people have access to their rights.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Disability Convention in December 2006. Its aim is to promote, protect and ensure equal human rights and freedoms for all disabled people, and to promote respect for disabled people's dignity.

Many governments, including New Zealand's, have signed and ratified (agreed to follow) the convention.

Who are disabled people?

The convention defines disabled people as those with "long-term, physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments". It says that because of their impairment and society's attitudes, disabled people may be prevented from participating in society the same as other people.

Everyone is different.

The convention's principles are based on respecting differences and accepting disabled people as part of a diverse human society.

When disabled people are left out, society disables them. If they are included, they can lead full and happy lives and contribute to society.

What does the convention mean for New Zealand?

New Zealand ratified the convention in September 2008. This means our Government must implement it (make it happen), so disabled people can enjoy the same human rights as everyone else.

Seventeen per cent of New Zealanders are disabled, and this large section of society is often left out. They can find it hard to get a good education, find a good job, participate in the community and have a say. The convention can help change this.

What does the Disability Convention say?

The convention aims to protect the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of disabled people. Governments that ratify the convention must implement the civil and political rights immediately. But they can implement the economic, social and cultural rights gradually, as they gain more resources.

The convention gives governments practical information on how to ensure rights for disabled people. This includes guidance on making health, education and other services accessible, such as by providing mobility aids, helpful technologies and 'easy read' information.

The convention specifically recognises:

Civil and political rights

- right to life
- protection in situations of risk and emergency
- equal recognition before the law
- access to justice
- right to liberty and security of the person
- freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment
- freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse
- protecting the integrity of the person
- right to liberty of movement and nationality
- right to live independently and be included in the community
- right to personal mobility
- freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information
- respect for privacy
- respect for home and the family
- participation in political and public life.

Economic, social and cultural rights

- education
- health
- rehabilitation and habilitation
- work
- an adequate standard of living and social protection
- participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport.

How does New Zealand implement the convention?

The Disability Convention says at least one area of government should deal with implementing it. In New Zealand, this is the Ministerial Committee on Disability Issues, with support from the Office for Disability Issues.

Governments must report to the UN on their progress. The first report is due two years after a government has ratified the convention. After that, reports are due every four years. New Zealand submitted its first report in 2011.

What is the Human Rights Commission's role?

The UN recognises the Commission as New Zealand's independent national human rights institution. The Commission's work is to promote, protect and monitor the human rights of all New Zealanders.

The Commission has identified disabled people as one of the most disadvantaged groups in New Zealand. A major focus of its work is improving their human rights.

The Disability Convention says any country that ratifies it must set up an independent checking process. In New Zealand, this involves the Commission, the Office of the Ombudsmen, and disabled peoples' organisations through the Disability Convention Coalition.

The Commission will report to the UN, separately from government reports, on how the convention is being implemented in New Zealand. Disabled peoples' organisations may also write reports to the UN.

How can I be involved?

The Disability Convention says disabled people and their organisations must be involved in how it is implemented.

You can do this by:

- telling everyone about the convention and what it means
- sharing your ideas with the government
- telling the Commission about your experiences of getting or not getting your human rights
- making a complaint if things go wrong
- becoming involved in the independent reports to the UN.

How can I get a copy of the Disability Convention?

The full convention and some summaries of the convention are available on audio tape and in Braille, full English, plain English, Easy Read, te reo Māori, Māori Easy Read, New Zealand Sign Language and a range of Pacific languages. A summary for children is also available.

You can find all of these on the Human Rights Commission's website:

www.hrc.co.nz/disabilityconvention

Athletes – Special Olympics New Zealand (www.specialolympics.org.nz)

Touch Compass Dance Trust [Photo: Gang Design]

Mobility Assistance Dogs Trust (www.mobilitydogs.co.nz)
[Photo: Grant Southam – Campbell Photography]

Signing – Handmade Productions Aotearoa (www.handmade.net.nz/)

Braille – Royal NZ Foundation of the Blind (www.rnzfb.org.nz)

Gina – Achilles International NZ (www.achillestrackclubnz.org.nz)
[Photo: Ben Watson: North Shore Times]

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