Letter from the Editor

Approximately one billion people in the world today live with disabilities of varying types. Some disabilities are well known such as blindness or deafness, but disability is far more wide-ranging. For example, people with a congenital condition like cerebral palsy, loss of a limb through accident or warfare, severe arthritis in middle age, or dementia in older age are all living with a disability. People with disabilities often encounter barriers to accessing health care and may also face discrimination and exclusion in education, employment, political involvement, in other words; they are deprived of their basic human rights. However, it has been shown that when people with disabilities are permitted and supported to participate fully in society, the community itself also benefits.

The International Day of Persons with Disabilities is held annually on 3 December and the theme for 2012 is “Removing barriers to create an inclusive and accessible society for all”. It aims to increase understanding of the issues related to disability, generate support for the rights of people with disabilities and raise awareness of the benefits to society in including persons with disabilities in all aspects of life. Human Rights Day is also celebrated in December (10 December) to mark the date in 1949 when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Enshrined in the WHO Constitution is the fundamental right to health of all human beings. This right goes beyond simply access to adequate health care to the underlying determinants of health, such as access to health information, and access to water and food, housing and education.

Included in this issue are several papers related to disability and human rights. A paper on leg amputation in Lebanon reports an incidence of 1.6 amputations per 10 000 persons in 2007. The main reason was diabetes, which highlights the association between noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and disability and hence the importance of prevention of NCDs. Health services delivery in Arab countries over the past 30 years is examined in 3 reviews. One appraised health services to the elderly (especially those with physical limitations) and people with mental illnesses and concluded that health systems still lacked awareness of the specific needs of such people. Another review considered the development of health care delivery systems in Arab countries. Most do now provide the essential components, but the review observed that the move towards market economies and potential cuts in public spending may undermine the advances in health care. The third review evaluated access and barriers to health care delivery. While the health status of Arab populations has improved, this has not been equal across different socioeconomic groups and governments need to address social policies to reduce these inequalities.


