

## Code of conduct for the use of images

### Introduction

The disability community has been fighting for many years for the full recognition of their citizenship rights and the implicit value of each and every human being. This position implies a paradigmatic shift from an impersonal conception of persons with a disease or disability as simply objects of care and assistance to subjects with rights, protagonists of their own lives and of the choices that concern them. The demands of persons with disabilities have culminated in the adoption, entry into force and ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.



While the adoption of a language that is more respectful of the person is not sufficient to guarantee an approach based on rights, it is a crucial factor in changing mentalities and in overcoming prejudices. Much progress has been made in this respect. For example, it is no longer acceptable to refer to persons with disabilities or diseases as “handicapped” or “cases”. Nevertheless, further efforts must be made to adapt not only spoken language but also every other means of communication to respect fully the human value and dignity of persons with disabilities. This must also include the images that accompany scientific publications and reports particularly if they are intended for large, mixed audiences.

This Self-Regulatory Code of Conduct is a guide on how to be responsible and respectful of the dignity and human value of the person for anyone using images of persons with diseases or disabilities in public communications

### 1. The potential of visual means of communication

For many people, images have a much more powerful evocative capacity, communicative universality and immediacy than the written word. The messages transmitted by images go beyond linguistic and cultural barriers and encourage accessibility. Images constitute the basis of augmentative and/or alternative communication because of these characteristics and are used to facilitate understanding and the development of language in persons with more profound communication disabilities, such as autistic people.

The same characteristics have given visual communication a ubiquitous, transversal role in our society. Images are often used to reinforce the effectiveness of words in various means of communication including conferences and congresses addressing large, mixed audiences. Combining words and images can have a much more powerful impact and orientate consciences and mentalities much more effectively than reasoned argument. To discourage the use of images would therefore not only be anachronistic but would also penalise persons with communication difficulties. Nevertheless, **when choosing images as a means of communication, the universal ethic of self-respect and respect for others must be**

observed.

## **2. The responsibilities of persons giving visual communications**

**Respect for the dignity** of the person and their image goes well beyond his/her informed consent and respect of confidentiality. The fact that the consent of the person portrayed has been obtained and the rules concerning respect of confidentiality adopted does not relieve research scientists, doctors, healthcare workers and anyone else using images in public communications from assuming full responsibility for the short and long-term consequences of the message they are communicating. Persons who are patients or clients of professionals often give their consent to be photographed and authorise the diffusion of their images because they may find themselves in a situation of dependence and subjection towards the persons asking for their consent or they want them to be used as a declaration of their condition. Nevertheless, the short-term effects of images of this kind do not always translate into the same positive consequences in the long-term. For example, images of a person with a disability who has experienced abuse by others can arouse true feelings of indignation and help to shake people's consciences in the short term. The same images, in the long term, may give the impression that the person is an object of pity deserving charity rather than a subject with rights deserving equal opportunities.

Responsibility for the diffusion of images of autistic people is even greater when the person in question is a minor or is not able to give their informed consent personally. Not only those authorising the diffusion of images on their behalf but also those who decide to which audiences they will be shown must be therefore fully conscious of their own responsibilities. Moreover, the decision to communicate through images should not be dictated only by the veracity of the images and their communicative potential but also take into account the effect of the images on the audience. Communication through images must therefore be a decision dictated by ethical principles implying responsibility not only to the person portrayed but also to the audience.

## **3. The context of visual communications**

The impact that certain images can have on an audience also depends on how and in which context they are used. The same visual messages that in an appropriate context are instruments for learning, knowledge or persuasion, in other contexts can have a tremendous impact on the audience. A superficial or inconsiderate use of certain images of persons with disabilities may offend and create misunderstandings, stereotypes, prejudices and confusion. For example, the use of images of persons scantily dressed in order to show malformations or other visible impairments may be indispensable in a teaching context with a strictly selected audience of students or workers in the field. Even in this context the person should not be identifiable to respect confidentiality and preserve anonymity. The same images displayed in a public context with a mixed audience can offend the dignity of the person portrayed and diminish the dignity of all persons with disabilities. In the same way, to show images of lesions or other anomalies on isolated parts of the body for demonstration purposes may be suitable in a teaching context and to all appearances seem a choice in keeping with respect of confidentiality and dignity of the person.

Nevertheless, to display parts of the body in more open, mixed contexts can contribute to depriving the person, and in general all persons with that diagnosis of their entirety and subjectivity. Visual communications in public contexts must therefore safeguard the confidentiality of the person portrayed and also respect their dignity.

#### **4. The attitude of persons giving visual communications**

Also the way in which words and images are combined and the attitude of the person presenting them in public can influence the message communicated. Words and attitudes accompanying images used in communications should therefore always be characterised by respect for human value and the dignity of the person.

As was said above, language that is too professional and detached can contribute to bringing the condition of disease or disability to the fore while the person recedes into the background as an object of curiosity. The effect in the long-term annihilates the intrinsic value of each human being. However, a witty attitude can also offend the person portrayed as well as the audience. For example, using a humorous tone of voice to comment films or images of persons with disabilities, and in particular persons with learning or developmental -disabilities to ridicule behaviours or unusual expressions does not gain the expected effect of winning over the audience. Rather, it denotes a lack of empathy for the person portrayed and those close to him/her, by transforming them into objects of derision and offending their dignity.

#### **QUICK CHECKLIST**

1. **Yes**, images help people to understand what you are communicating. Use images as support for verbal messages to make them more accessible.
2. **No**, do not use images of autistic people to reinforce what you want to communicate unless it is absolutely necessary
3. **Yes**, ask yourself if the images you are showing correspond to the image that the persons portrayed would like to portray of themselves.
4. **No**, the end does not justify the means: avoid displaying horrifying particulars and autistic people in degrading situations.
5. **Yes**, it can be useful to show images of bodies that describe diseases or disabilities for teaching purposes to a restricted audience of workers in the field.
6. **No**, do not show images in a public context that may offend the feelings of the audience and the dignity of the person (such as persons scantily dressed or isolated parts of the body).
7. **Yes**, accompany images of autistic people with comments and attitudes conveying the same empathy you would use to describe images of yourself or the ones you love.
8. **No**, do not comment on the images of autistic people as if you were talking about mere objects of research or derision.
9. **Yes**, it is useful to show images that support the value and potential of autistic people
10. **No**, the images you display should never imply autistic people are useless or inadequate.

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