

Subject **Improving Health Services for Canadians with Intellectual Disabilities: A Battle Worth Fighting**

27 May 16 Prior to the 1950's, people with intellectual disabilities (ID) were often institutionalized, receiving their medical care within that setting. Recognizing the benefits of community-based living, many practitioners and academics began advocating a shift away from institutionalized care to a community-based approach. The initial transition was far from seamless; integrating a complex population into general health care services proved more difficult than first imagined. Yet in the end, it was clearly a large step in the right direction. In the 1930's, the mean life expectancy for somebody with an ID was a mere 19 years, a stark contrast to an expectancy of 66 years in the 1990s. For individuals with Down syndrome the change was even more dramatic – from 9 years in the 1920s to 56 years in the 1990s. Clearly, the shift to community-based care coupled with the dedication of health care professionals, researchers and caregivers dramatically improved the lives of millions of people with ID and their families.

There remains some debate as to the effect of ID on lifespan; however, most studies indicate that people with ID still live shorter lives than the general population. One recent study in the UK concluded that the gap may be as high as 13 years. Fortunately, there remains hope – it doesn't have to be this way. While people with ID sometimes face a different set of medical issues from the general population, most researchers contend that there are no substantial medical barriers to reducing the life-expectancy gap. A large portion of the gap can be bridged by increased exercise and better nutrition alone.

While Special Olympics may seem like an unlikely advocate for health issues to some, they have made the health and safety of their athletes a priority from the start. As their programs began to grow in reach and scope, they began to observe significant health issues that needed to be addressed. Out of this need arose the Healthy Athletes program, which has provided more than 1.6 million free health examinations in more than 130 countries. For Special Olympics British Columbia (SOBC) – an early adopter of the program – the results were visible immediately. One SOBC coach recalled a young swimmer, consistently finishing second yet never topping the podium. An eye examination at a Healthy Athlete Screening revealed a clear visual impairment. It turns out, the athlete was unable to finish first as they needed to follow the lead of a swimmer to avoid hitting the wall. After the impairment was revealed, the athlete was unstoppable.

Intending to build on their early successes, SOBC has launched a 3-year campaign with the simple objective of effecting a dramatic change to the current level of health of all British Columbians with ID – not just SOBC athletes. Howe International Consulting Group is proud to be working alongside SOBC to achieve this noble goal. Together, we will network with regional stakeholders and identify critical areas in need of attention, before implementing an extensive and sustainable intervention. For information about how you or your organization can get involved, please visit www.specialolympics.bc.ca. Alternatively, you can email health@specialolympics.bc.ca or showe@howeinternational.consulting.