# Why I recommend Disability Matters resources as an adjunct to the medical school curriculum

As a fourth year medical student and as part of my ‘modified elective’ during the Covid-19 induced lockdown, I have completed many of the Disability Matters learning sessions and packages. I advocate that these high quality resources would be beneficial alongside traditional teaching methods and especially in the post Covid-19 era when learning is relocated to a digital platform.

## What is Disability Matters?

Disability Matters is a free online resource, co-authored by disabled young people and their families, which aims to support the UK workforce in firstly recognising the barriers that exist for disabled people and then facilitating their eradication. Available as concise 20-40 minute sessions concentrating on specific issues such as independence, advocacy, and hidden disabilities, these can be completed independently or as part of a package. Packages have been individually constructed for employers, staff and volunteers throughout the health, education and social sectors and thus contain the most relevant topics for their specific occupations.

## Achieving the benefits of patient contact without direct patient contact

Medical students learn greatly from meeting patients and hearing their personal accounts. These are more engaging and memorable than when the same point is made but without association to a specific individual. Disability Matters, despite never facilitating direct interaction with a patient, enables learners to achieve the benefits of direct patient contact through its co-authored component. Each learning session has input via video interviews, audio or typed quotes from disabled young people and their families, providing exposure to individual experiences from the patients themselves*.* I found this to be the most notable element of Disability Matters as through this the illusion was created that I had met these individuals and listened to their opinions and experiences first hand as I would have done had I met them in clinic. This is a valuable asset because it enables the benefits of direct patient contact to be accessible through pre-recorded online content.

Moreover,I found that I accessed a greater number and variety of disabled patients’ and their families’ views through this material than I could have achieved on clinical placements. This is because Disability Matters condenses multiple patient interviews into one location, allowing a dozen voices to be heard, succinctly addressing a particular topic in a 20-minute session. This meant that I gained knowledge regarding a range of conditions, which I have never encountered before, including for example a young boy with Tourette’s talking about what adjustments to the clinic visit experience can really help him. Also, on topics when there is no ‘right’ answer a multitude of viewpoints are provided, which represent many sides of a discussion.

This efficient method for medical students to acquire the benefits of direct patient contact also has benefits for the participants and authors. Disabled young people and their families may already spend a lot of their time at hospital or attending medical meetingsand may or may not want to spend more of their time sharing their often personal and sometimes upsetting accounts to help medical students learn. Through Disability Matters an interview can be recorded at a convenient time and then upon upload it can be viewed by an unlimited number of students.

## Encouraging practical modifications to one’s own practice

A perceivable limitation of this virtual learning resource is that it may not invoke change in practice. However, the practical guidance given and consistent emphasis on reflection effectively prepares the learner for real world application. Opportunities for reflection are interwoven throughout Disability Matters and prompt the learner to analyze their own attitudes and behaviours and then consider new ways to actively improve health, educational and social outcomes for disabled people through change in their own current practice. For example, the Environmental Challenges session invites the learner to reflect on the positive effects of offering a patient who struggles in busy waiting rooms the first appointment of the day and hence preventing an avoidable and distressing scenario. Problem solving examples such as this converts what could be a theoretical learning opportunity, lacking external validity, into a useful resource that prescriptively indicates where and how to implement the theory in clinical practice.

## Taking the social approach to disability

Disability Matters demonstrates that it is external factors, which disable an individual with impairments, and as such disability is adjustable through modifications to society. Traditional medical school teaching concentrates on a disease or condition resulting in impairment, how this affects normal functioning and what we can do to cure or prevent this abnormality. In my experience Medical school predominantly aims to develop diagnostic and therapeutic competency in clinical practice and to prepare its students for passing exams. Alternatively, Disability Matters teaches its students to actively seek methods to accommodate for patients with complex needs and hence provide more holistic care. In other words, medical school teaching tends to take the medical approach to disability and Disability Matters embodies the social approach.

As such, Disability Matters content encourages the learner to view the disabled young person in their broader context. For example, the Continence Matters session provided insight into the impracticality of many ‘disabled public toilets’. Their unsuitability for changing a child with complex needs in a wheelchair disables the child and their caregiver from using them. I recognised that these non-medical areas of the disabled young person’s life, are important to learn about as a medical student because it enhanced my awareness of the difficulties that are intertwined with being disabled in the society we currently function in and subsequently expanded my understanding of these patients. I envision that adopting this social perspective of disability will assist me as I progress to make better decisions for my patients.

## User-friendly, engaging and flexible

Disability Matters is well designed to be user friendly. The interface is intuitive and easily navigable. The learner creates their free personal account and then via thematic folders has the freedom to complete whichever topics are of most relevance or interest to them. Students can complete as many sessions as they please, at any time convenient and each session can be paused and restarted as many times as required. There is also a visual indication for which sessions are underway, completed or unopened, allowing progress to be tracked easily. Within the sessions themselves there are many interactive features such as drag-and-drop or choosing options to test knowledge, clicking on different photos for the next chunk of information to appear and many embedded videos and audios to play. The combination of learning by reading, listening and doing accommodates for all types of learners, and shifting between the three modalities keeps the content stimulating. Finally, at the end of each session or package a certificate is awarded, which can be downloaded immediately or at a later date, which both encourages completion and can be used for evidence of such.

## Future implications

Medicine post Covid-19 consists of markedly reduced patient contact and will foreseeably remain as such for some time. With clinics held on the telephone and non-essential physical examinations kept to a minimum, we are witnessing a shift of clinical medicine and medical education to a digital platform. Therefore, recognising and utilising online resources such as Disability Matters is particularly pertinent. Even as clinical contact resumes, traditional medical school teaching would benefit from incorporating Disability Matters into their curriculum. It does not aim to replace direct patient contact as listening to and interacting with disabled children and young people remains invaluable, but it would equip students with an enriched awareness of disability and the confidence to then implement this in practice.

***Elizabeth Lawson*** *is a fourth year medical student at the University of Leeds.*

*Twitter @ELawson\_*