

No Act of Mercy

On October 24, 1993, Robert Latimer wrapped his daughter Tracy in a blanket and placed her in the cab of his pick-up truck. He connected a hose to the truck's exhaust pipe, ran it through the window, and filled the cab with carbon monoxide. Tracy died from asphyxiation at the age of 14.

When the description of Robert Latimer's deed is phrased in this way, without mention of Tracy's severe disabilities, the act of murdering a child sounds as it should: horrific. But various media stories focused on Tracy's disabilities and to many, Latimer was seen to have committed an "act of mercy" rather than murder. The resulting public dialogue largely took a similar tone. Latimer's supporters insisted that Tracy's murder was committed out of mercy for a child with no quality of life, since Tracy – who couldn't speak, walk, or perform any of the tasks that many of us take for granted – was said to be in constant and terrible pain. At odds with this summary of Tracy's lived experience were the opinions of educators and caregivers who actually worked with her. They described her as a young girl who loved many things, including music, and who showed great joy at the sight of horses, despite her constant physical pain.

The Latimer case sparked an intense debate in this country regarding euthanasia and the way in which Canadians see and value the lives of those who have a disability. Calls for leniency and even absolution for Robert Latimer belied a deep ignorance of the frightening precedent such actions would create. Wisely, the Supreme Court of Canada recognized that treating Latimer's crime as anything less than murder would have essentially shown that a different set of rules were in place for those who choose to end the life of a person with a disability. Robert Latimer was charged with second degree murder and sentenced to life in prison.

On December 6, 2010, Robert Latimer was granted full parole. As news of Latimer's parole made headlines, pockets of sympathetic public dialogue resurfaced, casting Latimer as the victim of an insensitive

justice system. This should cause us to pause and reflect. How has our society's view of people with disabilities changed 18 years after the murder of Tracy Latimer, if at all?

The Alberta Committee of Citizens with Disabilities believes that the life of each person with a disability has as much value as any other person. Canada's laws are in place to protect each of us from the kind of fate that Tracy Latimer suffered. We must be unbending in the universal application of these laws, especially when the victim is unable to defend him- or herself, as was the case with Tracy Latimer. "If we choose to extend this courtesy of forgiving crimes committed by parents only to parents of children with disabilities," says University of Alberta professor Dick Sobsey, "we increase the danger to the most vulnerable group of children." Canada's justice system exposed Robert Latimer's crime for what it was, and he has served his time for the murder of his daughter. Moving forward, we must never cast him as the victim. Tracy Latimer was the victim, and her murder was, by no measure, a merciful act.



Education for Life Bursary: Apply Now!

June 30, 2011, is the application deadline for ACCD's 2011-2012 Education for Life Bursary. Individuals with disabilities seeking to continue their education as post-secondary students are eligible to receive bursaries ranging from \$300 to \$800. Preference is given to students entering their first year. Details and an application form can be found on our web site at www.accd.net, or you can contact the ACCD office at 780-488-9088 or toll free at 1-800-387-2514.



Project Update: Barrier-Free Health and Medical Services in Alberta

ACCD's *Barrier-Free Health and Medical Services in Alberta* project has come a long way since we began work in February, 2010. After months of rigorous writing and research, our project team is nearing the completion of our final report, which will soon be made available.

ACCD has also completed 10 site audits at medical facilities in various locations throughout the province. The results of the site visits will be presented in the form of descriptive case studies. This method allowed us to collect data from a range of settings that provide health and medical services.

ACCD's audit tool is designed so that auditors begin in the parking area and make their way along exterior and interior paths of travel, through the waiting room, and into the examination or diagnostic area.

The ACCD Audit Tool measures the following areas of accessibility:

- Exterior parking, driveways, and walks
- Entrances and doorways
- Exterior and interior ramps and stairs
- Interior path of travel and doorways
- Elevators
- Washrooms
- Counters
- Waiting rooms
- Examination rooms
- Emergency features

The project's second phase is now underway. ACCD is developing a communications and educational media campaign that allows us to disseminate our findings and recommendations to medical professionals, the disability community, and the general public.

The importance of the *Barrier-Free Health and Medical Services in Alberta* project rests on the belief that Albertans with disabilities are entitled to the same health and medical services as everyone else. The outcomes of this project

will not only benefit Albertans with disabilities but any Albertan who, at some point in his or her life, might acquire a short- or long-term disability, and seniors and people who have age-related disabilities. If the goal of Alberta Health Services is to shift its focus from institutional to community-based health and medical services, then the starting point should be assuring that doctor offices, medical clinics, and medical imaging technology are accessible to every Albertan regardless of ability or disability.



threeSOURCE is an information hub for Alberta's third

sector. They collect grey literature publications for, by, and about nonprofits and social services in our province. Grey literature is information produced by all levels of government, and by academics, business and industry, in electronic and print formats not controlled by commercial publishing. threeSOURCE is included in GreyNet International's index of web-based resources on grey literature.

ACCD and the Alberta Disabilities Forum have recently placed documents on threeSOURCE in an effort to have wider distribution of our important resources.

threeSOURCE is maintained by the Edmonton Social Planning Council. The ESPC focuses on social research – particularly in the areas of low income and poverty. They are dedicated to encouraging the adoption of equitable social policy and educating the public regarding the social issues that impact them on a daily basis.

This project has also received assistance from Alberta Culture and Community Spirit through funding from the Community Initiatives Program, and is supported by funding from the Edmonton Community Foundation.



Together. We Hold The Power!

Full Participation - Accessibility - Equity

