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## Opening Address

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I am deeply honoured to be invited by the Hong Kong Society of Child Neurology and Developmental Paediatrics to attend the Opening Ceremony of this Conference. The title of the conference is "Developmental Dyslexia in Children Using the Chinese Language: fMRI and Advocacy". I know very little about fMRI, other than that it stands for functional magnetic resonance imaging, an advanced technique to reveal the moment-by-moment brain activity involved in seeing and memorising information. I am fascinated by the knowledge it brings and grateful for the breakthroughs medical science and technology have brought. The conference today also has a focus on the Chinese language; it is therefore of particular relevance to the Chinese language community including Hong Kong.

I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Hong Kong Society of Child Neurology and Developmental Paediatrics for the significant contribution it has made in this field. As professionals, they have lived the lives of many dyslexic children and as advocates they have fought for them under very trying circumstances. I know the journey has been long, painful and often lonely. I wish to salute the Society for its work and the children and the families affected for their courage. May I ask you to demonstrate our appreciation and support for them in the usual way.

You must have heard these words of Francis Bacon, "Knowledge is power and ignorance is bliss". Unfortunately in my field of work ignorance is far from bliss. It breeds discrimination and deprivation and it fuddles our mental apparatus so that we cannot see.

Let me share with you a story that I heard recently. A man was in a bad accident and was injured. He lost both ears and he received a large sum of money from his insurer.

It was always his dream to own a business, so he went out and purchased a small computer firm. He knew his limitations and decided to hire someone to run the business. He picked out three candidates and interviewed each. His last question was always the same.

"Do you notice anything unusual about me?" he asked the first candidate.

"Yes, you have no ears", came the reply.

"Do you notice anything unusual about me?" he asked the second candidate.

"Yes, you have no ears", came the reply.

"Do you notice anything unusual about me?" he asked the third candidate.

"Yea, You're wearing contacts".

Thinking that he had found the man for the job, he said, "That's correct but how did you know?" "You can't wear glasses if you don't have any ears, can you?"

This is what I call a double whammy. People always get distracted by other's disabilities. Perhaps we cannot see them but really the ears are there. This is also what I call the rule of double jeopardy for people with disabilities. It is having a disability and being discriminated against.

The subject before us today is dyslexia, a major type of Specific Learning Disability (SLD), which is also a disability associated with brain functions. The kind of discrimination that people with SLD face is not ill treatment after other people have learnt about their disability, but mistreatment when people do not know of or understand their disability. SLD makes an individual learn differently from others and hence has particularly serious impacts on children who are in their learning age. If the school or the teacher does not understand it, children with the disability will not be identified and their poor performance in class or in study will likely be considered as the result of their laziness or a lack of discipline, or inadequate supervision

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A Wu

by their parents. Yet given the right diagnosis and teaching methods, the child can perform equally well or better than others. We know of many great scientists, musicians and politicians who were or are dyslexic.

The brain is truly the most mysterious part of our body. I was told that the brains of the dyslexic children are "wired" differently. This world would be a far lesser place if we end up suppressing the Einstein- or Spielberg-like intelligence because our mental apparatus was fuddled and we cannot see.

To deal with the challenge of SLD the first step must be to see it, to recognise it and to understand it. SLD is not a maturity issue or a developmental lag that children will grow out of. It is a disability. It is a disorder and it has a biological basis. The disorder must be assessed and carefully diagnosed by professionals in the field. A course of action can only be formulated on the basis of knowledge.

The Disability Discrimination Ordinance came into effect in Hong Kong in 1996. Disability is defined to include specifically a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction. Under our law, SLD is a disability and we need clinical support for it. This is an important point to bear in mind because it is this law which makes education with reasonable accommodation a right, and not a matter of discretion.

To treat SLD, and the milder forms are particularly at risk, as a maturity, discipline or learning issue, would be like Moses leading us into the wilderness. These cases would be classified out of the law with the obligation to provide reasonable accommodation undermined. The support for children with SLD is not a matter of discretion. It is a matter of law. It is a right.

With the diagnostic knowledge available, the second question must be to find a strategy for learning that is suitable for these children. The identification of an education strategy requires a multidisciplinary approach between the health care professionals and the educators.

According to the Education Department (now the Education Manpower Bureau – EMB), the number of students with SLD identified by the Department increased from 221 in School Year 1998/99 to 463 in 2000/01. The latest figure (to 2001) disclosed by EMB indicates that there

are now over 900 such children identified. EMB recognises that such increases may be attributable to parents' and teachers' increased awareness of the disability. It should be no surprise that the actual figure may well be much greater. There is a pressing need to increase the awareness of both parents and teachers in the initial identification of SLD. Initial identification must be followed by professional assessment and diagnosis and education planning. EMB and the Department of Health must be given adequate resources to support the needs of these children.

To help educators to provide effectively for children with disabilities, the EOC has issued the Code of Practice to provide practical guidance to them. These guidelines deal with admission, teaching and assessment adjustments required. Right now the EOC is also developing, in collaboration with the EMB, an e-training package for teachers on equal opportunities in the education field in relation to disability. We have also been in regular contact with the EMB and the Hong Kong Examination Authority regarding the support that should be provided to students with SLD.

Advocacy is to effect change. Change requires social commitment from the community and policy and financial commitments from government. Change is necessary not only because it is the decent thing to do, it is a matter of law.

Equal opportunities are about people and about everyone. Of all forms of human rights, nothing can be more basic than the rights to life and to survival. An extension of these rights is the right to individual development, and education is the first port of call. Development of the individual is an investment in human capital. It leads to self autonomy and self sufficiency which in turn leads to lesser dependency on the public purse and sustainable social and economic development.

Let me conclude by quoting from Mark Twain (Joan of Arc): The common eye sees only the outside of things, and judges by that, but the seeing eye pierces through and reads the heart and the soul, finding their capacities which the outside did not indicate or promise, and which the other kind could not detect.

The advocate must be that piercing eye looking from within.