

***Brain Injury as “Invisible” Disability Leads to Problematic Discourse***

By David Kracke, JD

“Brain injuries are not invisible!”

This statement was said to me recently by my colleague Melissa McCart, and it is a game changing declaration!

During my entire career in the brain injury field, I have routinely and often stated, as a matter of fact, that brain injuries are “invisible.” They are the “Invisible Injury”, unseen and unrecognized by anyone other than the survivor. This phrase is so well known in the BI community that it approaches the level of cliché.

But was that really ever the case? Were brain injuries really invisible, or was I just not seeing what I was looking at?

In actuality, brain injuries are quite visible! And by describing them as “invisible” perhaps we are sending the wrong message. Perhaps we are lessening our effectiveness in helping brain injury survivors. Perhaps our real challenge is to teach people to see brain injuries, to rip up the supposed cloak of invisibility surrounding brain injuries and never again call them invisible. Perhaps we all need to open our eyes a little wider.

Maybe our calling brain injuries “invisible” was a way of marginalizing brain injuries? Maybe it was a defense mechanism excusing us from action designed to help brain injury survivors? Maybe it was a form of self-forgiveness? How can we be expected to do anything when we can’t even see the problem in the first place?

Before I continue, I want to be perfectly clear about something: To every person reading this column, brain injuries are not invisible. You wouldn’t be reading this if you weren’t somehow personally connected to someone who has suffered a brain injury whether that person is yourself, a loved one, a friend, a patient, a colleague or someone else. And, if that is the case, then you have certainly “seen” the brain injury.

You have “seen” the brain injury when a person is crumpled into a ball due to a debilitating headache. You have “seen” the brain injury when a person is sitting alone in a dark room because the fluorescent lights and loud noises in the other room cause the person to retreat to that relative quiet place. Brain injuries are “seen” when a student can’t keep her eyes open in class due to fatigue and when an athlete collapses on a playing field after a violent concussion.

Brain injuries are “seen” when someone participates in a support group and describes the difficulties they had getting to the group because of a confusing bus schedule. They are “seen” when a “quick” trip to the grocery store takes an hour and a half because the aisles and colors are just too confusing. Brain injuries, it seems, are seen in more ways than we might care to acknowledge.

By pure coincidence, as I was contemplating where this column would go, I watched an interview on CNN with Travis Wilson, a decorated veteran, TBI survivor and lead ambassador to the Green Beret Foundation.

The interviewer, as if on cue for me, stated “When you look at you (Travis), you look perfectly fine. Part of the reason TBI is referred to as an invisible injury, right...is because you look at you and it appears nothing’s wrong.”

Travis didn’t miss a beat and answered that the interviewer was wrong. He said: “You don’t get to see them at home, with their families and the anguish that they go through, the headaches that they do have...They’re going to endure a lot of other things that come with a TBI...because they’re going to go through some other difficulties.”

In other words, the brain injury is not going to be invisible to those who are affected by it, whether it be the survivor or the survivor’s loved ones. And if the survivor and the survivor’s loved ones see the injury, doesn’t everyone have the ability to see it as well? And if we all have the ability to see it, don’t we really have the responsibility to see it.

And if we have that responsibility, then isn’t calling the brain injury “invisible” really just a cop out?

Of course I see some errors in my argument here. I know that there truly are signs and symptoms of brain injuries that are difficult to appreciate if you are not experiencing those signs and symptoms personally. But, under this analysis, isn’t it true that cancer is an “invisible” injury as well? Isn’t diabetes an “invisible” injury? And if those are “invisible” injuries, why don’t we call them that?

By singling out brain injuries as “invisible” we definitely do more harm than good. In doing so, perhaps we excuse ourselves from recognizing brain injuries and perhaps in our excusing we somehow minimize our expectations that anything to meaningfully help brain injury survivors will get done. Even if this argument is merely speculative, why risk it? Why perpetuate this myth of invisibility any longer?

From this moment forward, I, for one, will stop describing brain injuries as “invisible.” I’ve seen them, and if I’ve seen them they can’t, by definition, be invisible. What about you? You’ve seen them as well, right? Let’s stop perpetuating a myth and by doing so, let’s make brain injuries as visible to others as they are to us. Brain injuries deserve to be seen, and maybe it’s up to us to make sure that they are.