

OPINION PIECE

Wednesday 13^h September, 2016

Mercury Talking Point: Challenging our unconscious biases.

Your story about Harry's experience of discrimination as a result of his epilepsy (17 August 2016) is a sad reminder for us to examine the biases we may unconsciously harbour towards others.

Harry's story echoes many others Epilepsy Tasmania is told about the misunderstanding and stigma that surrounds epilepsy, so I wasn't surprised he didn't want his photo published for fear of further discrimination.

As Anti-Discrimination Commissioner Robin Banks recently explained, "All of us have biases, both negative and positive. These are shaped by social structures, culture, family, the media and personal experiences. Some of these biases we are not even conscious of, hence the term 'unconscious bias'. Our unconscious biases can and do influence our views of others, as well as our responses to others. Acting on our unconscious biases can result in individuals and groups getting unfair benefits or experiencing barriers to equal opportunity. If we better understand our biases, we can take steps to make sure our conscious actions are not influenced by them."

Epilepsy is a neurological condition that results in seizures, so of course Harry and others living with epilepsy want to be treated with the same level of respect that you and I expect. And with 1 in 10 of us experiencing a seizure and 1 in 25 going on to develop epilepsy, one day it may well be you or I with a sad story in the paper.

One of the first steps we can take to improve the level of respect given is not to classify people with epilepsy as 'epileptics'. They are people living with a condition, in the same way others might live with high blood pressure, arthritis and diabetes. And regardless of what we live with, everyone is entitled to the same rights and opportunities for inclusion and access.

As a state, we must actively choose to create an inclusive society, but doing so will require us all to think consciously about how we act towards each other, and begin noticing the indicators that show us not everyone sees the world in the same way we do.

Although we are all quick to judge other people's biases, we all have them to some extent - there will always be groups of people that we consciously feel uncomfortable around. These conscious patterns of discrimination are problematic, but again they pale in comparison to the unconscious patterns that impact us every day.

Unconscious perceptions influence many of the most important decisions we make and can have a profound effect on the lives of many people in many ways. They often play out so subtly they are hard to spot unless, you're the one on the receiving end.

Epilepsy Tasmania would like to see Tasmania work to achieve 'inclusive workplaces' where customers, employees and job seekers feel comfortable and are treated with respect.

Our vision is for Tasmanian workplaces to embrace cultural diversity, recognise and reframe biases, use positive language and visuals, and model respectful behaviours. Workplaces that put valuable feedback systems in place, create accessible office layouts and use varied and appropriate communication methods - in short, workplaces that aim to expect and accept the differences between us all.

Let's put an end to all of the stigma and discrimination in Tasmania, including that of epilepsy. Examining our negative unconscious biases and taking steps to change them is the first step towards improving the quality of life for Harry and others like him.

Ms Wendy Groot
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