

Faculty Guide **MEDICAL DISABILITIES**

OVERVIEW AND DEFINITION

Medical disabilities may be acute or chronic, visible or invisible, and the type of support needed is as diverse as the individuals seeking assistance.

Chronic Illnesses

Types of medical conditions having educational implications include chronic health problems such as **fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, arthritis, kidney disease, allergies, cardiovascular problems, cancer, diabetes, and HIV infections**, as well as **respiratory and gastro-intestinal disorders**. Many of the college students who suffer from these conditions have frequent absences due to the effect of medication, fatigue and pain. The disability support office works closely with medical professionals to ensure that the educational implications of these conditions are understood and accommodated. Medical conditions can have an impact on an individual's ability to meet both the cognitive and physical demands of a college program.

Two examples of these chronic illnesses are described below.

Fibromyalgia (FM) is a chronic pain disorder with a broad spectrum of psychological and physical symptoms. It is a condition of widespread musculoskeletal pain usually affecting the arms, legs, back, chest, hands, feet and often the jaw. It is typically associated with chronic fatigue, sleep disturbance and generalized stiffness. Many FM patients also experience depression and anxiety as well as concentration and memory problems.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome(CFS) is a debilitating disorder characterized by profound tiredness or fatigue. This condition is primarily characterized by extreme fatigue, muscle pain, depression, problems with concentration and memory and extreme flu-like symptoms. Individuals with CFS may become exhausted with only light physical exertion. Anxiety, irritability and problems with concentration and memory are common with this condition.

Other Medical Conditions

Tourette syndrome is a neurologically based disorder with a strong genetic component. It is commonly diagnosed by a physician specializing in this disorder. Other conditions that can co-exist with this condition include obsessive-compulsive disorder and mood disorders, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and learning disabilities. Uncontrollable motor and vocal tics characterize this disorder, including eye blinking, head jerking, shoulder shrugging and facial grimacing, or simple vocal tics such as throat clearing and tongue clicking. Echolalic speech can occur (repeating words or phrases just heard) and in rare cases, coprolalia can occur (vocalizing socially unacceptable words).

Asthma is an obstruction of the airways, characterized by narrowing of the bronchial tubes, tissue swelling and clogging mucus. Males are twice as likely as females to have it. Many people with asthma improve during adolescence.

Epilepsy is a disorder of the central nervous system which results in a seizure. For many adults, epileptic seizures are largely controlled by anti-convulsant medication. There are four major kinds of seizures, distinguished by the degree of convulsion and the extent to which the person is conscious. **Grand mal** epilepsy involves sudden and violent convulsions and loss of consciousness, whereas **Petit mal** epilepsy is milder and involves little or no loss of consciousness. The person may stop what he/she is doing and stare momentarily.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Some specific, medically oriented knowledge can be very helpful in understanding a student's needs and learning patterns. It is important, however, that faculty approach medical information about a student from an educational, and not from a diagnostic point of view.

A common problem to students with medical disabilities is fatigue and pain. They may have to expend more energy for the routines of daily living and so consideration should be given to their expenditure of energy in the classroom and surrounding environment. Pain and the adverse side effects of medication can be significant detractors to learning. Some generalized instructional strategies include:

- locate equipment and supplies in close proximity to the student
- pre-arrange a cue to refocus attention
- if the classroom is in a remote location request a change
- be aware of procedures if there is a medical emergency
- be prepared to meet with student and disability support office for contingency planning
- work closely with the disability support office to ensure a successful learning experience for the student

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Students with disabilities are expected to accomplish the "core competencies" of their programs. To achieve this, accommodations are provided to minimize or eliminate any disadvantage their disability presents. Accommodations are unique to each individual. The disability support office in your college makes these recommendations based on confidential documentation that the student provides to the college. Some of the most commonly provided academic accommodations to students with medical disabilities include:

- access to notetaker and/or scribe
- use of memory aids such as formula cards during tests
- allowance of break periods as needed for rest and taking medication
- ergonomically designed seating/furnishings
- adjusted course grades for medical reasons (ie. no penalty for late withdrawals)
- alternative methods of evaluation
- provision of extended time for tests and exams. The amount of extra time is determined by the disability support office.
- allowances for their absences for medical reasons (ie. rescheduling of tests or exams)

RESOURCES

The disability support office in your college will have brochures, books and videos available for

loan as well as information about local resources.

Ontario Fibromyalgia Association
250 Bloor St. E., Suite 901,
Toronto, ON M4W 3P2
Phone (416) 967-1414, Fax (416) 967-7171

National ME/FM Action Network
(Chronic Fatigue/Fibromyalgia)
3836 Carling Ave.,
Nepean, ON K2K 2Y6
Phone (613) 829-6667, Fax (613) 829-6667
e-mail: ag922@freenet.carleton.ca

Tourette Syndrome Foundation of Canada,
194 Jarvis St., Suite 206,
Toronto, Ontario. M5B 2B7
(Tel: 1-800-361-3120)

This document is a compilation of resources from CCDI member colleges.
