An Overview of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health

The following are excerpts from the complete document the “International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF). The complete document can be found at http://www.who.int/classifications/icf/training/icfbeginnersguide.pdf. We will discuss applications, rehabilitation language, outcomes management and patient advocacy in future issues.

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Introduction
The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, known more commonly as ICF, provides a standard language and framework for the description of health and health-related states. It is a classification of health and health-related domains – domains that help us to describe changes in body function and structure, what a person with a health condition can do in a standard environment (their level of capacity), as well as what they actually do in their usual environment (their level of performance). These domains are classified from body, individual and societal perspectives by means of two lists: a list of body functions and structure, and a list of domains of activity and participation. In ICF, the term functioning refers to all body functions, activities and participation, while disability is similarly an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. ICF also lists environmental factors that interact with all these components.

The WHO Family of International Classifications
The ICF belongs to the WHO family of international classifications, the best known member of which is the ICD-10 (the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems). ICD-10 gives users an etiological framework for the classification, by diagnosis, of diseases, disorders and other health conditions. By contrast, ICF classifies functioning and disability associated with health conditions. The ICD-10 and ICF are therefore complementary, and users are encouraged to use them together to create a broader and more meaningful picture of the experience of health of individuals and populations.
Studies show that diagnosis alone does not predict service needs, length of hospitalization, level of care or functional outcomes. Nor is the presence of a disease or disorder an accurate predictor of receipt of disability benefits, work performance, return to work potential, or likelihood of social integration. This means that if we use a medical classification of diagnoses alone we will not have the information we need for health planning and management purposes. What we lack is data about levels of functioning and disability. ICF makes it possible to collect those vital data in a consistent and internationally comparable manner.

ICF Applications
Service Provision

At the individual level...
- For the assessment of individuals: What is the person's level of functioning?
- For individual treatment planning: What treatments or interventions can maximize function?
- For the evaluation of treatment and other interventions: What are the outcomes of the treatment? How useful were the interventions?
- For communication among physicians, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and other health works, social service works and community agencies
- For self-evaluation by consumers: How would I rate my capacity in mobility or communication?

At the institutional level...
- For educational and training purposes
- For resource planning and development: What health care and other services will be needed?
- For quality improvement: How well do we serve our clients? What basic indicators for quality assurance are valid and reliable?
- For management and outcome evaluation: How useful are the services we are providing?
- For managed care models of health care delivery: How cost-effective are the services we provide? How can the service be improved for better outcomes at a lower cost?

At the social level...
- For eligibility criteria for state entitlements such as social security benefits, disability pensions, workers’ compensation and insurance: Are the criteria for eligibility for disability benefits evidence based, appropriate to social goals and justifiable?
- For social policy development, including legislative reviews, model legislation, regulations, and guidelines, and definitions for anti-discrimination legislation: Will guaranteeing rights improve functioning at the societal level? Can we measure this improvement and adjust our policy and law accordingly?
- For needs assessments: What are the needs of persons with various levels of disability – impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions?
- For environmental assessment for universal design, implementation of mandated accessibility, identification of environmental facilitators and barriers, and changes to social policy: How can we make the social and built environment more accessible for all persons, those with and those without disabilities? Can we assess and measure improvement?

The Model of ICF
Two major conceptual models of disability have been proposed. The medical model views disability as a feature of the person, directly caused by disease, trauma or other health condition, which requires medical care provided in the form of individual treatment by professionals. Disability, on this model, calls for medical or other treatment or intervention, to ‘correct’ the problem with the individual.

The social model of disability, on the other hand, sees disability as a socially-created problem and not at all an attribute of an individual. On the social model, disability demands a political response, since the problem is created by an unaccommodating physical environment brought about by attitudes and other features of the social environment.

On their own, neither model is adequate, although both are partially valid. Disability is a complex phenomena that is both a problem at the level of a person’s body, and a complex and primarily social phenomena. Disability is always an interaction between features of the person and features of the overall context in which the person lives, but some aspects of disability are almost entirely internal to the person, while another aspect is almost entirely external. In other words, both medical and social responses are appropriate to the problems associated with disability; we cannot wholly reject either kind of intervention.
A better model of disability, in short, is one that synthesizes what is true in the medical and social models, without making the mistake each makes in reducing the whole, complex notion of disability to one of its aspects.

This more useful model of disability might be called the biopsychosocial model. ICF is based on this model, an integration of medical and social. ICF provides, by this synthesis, a coherent view of different perspectives of health: biological, individual and social.

The following diagram is one representation of the model of disability that is the basis for ICF

![Diagram of ICF model]

**Concepts of functioning and disability**

As the diagram indicates, in ICF disability and functioning are viewed as outcomes of interactions between health conditions (diseases, disorders and injuries) and contextual factors.

Among contextual factors are external environmental factors (for example, social attitudes, architectural characteristics, legal and social structures, as well as climate, terrain and so forth); and internal personal factors, which include gender, age, coping styles, social background, education, profession, past and current experience, overall behavior pattern, character and other factors that influence how disability is experienced by the individual.

The diagram identifies the three levels of human function classified by ICF: functioning at the level of body or body part, the whole person, and the whole person in a social context. Disability therefore involves dysfunctioning at one or more of these same levels: impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. The formal definitions of these components of ICF are provided in the box below.
**Body Functions** are physiological functions of body systems (including psychological functions).

**Body Structures** are anatomical parts of the body such as organs, limbs and their components.

**Impairments** are problems in body function or structure such as a significant deviation or loss.

**Activity** is the execution of a task or action by an individual.

**Participation** is involvement in a life situation.

**Activity Limitations** are difficulties an individual may have in executing activities.

**Participation Restrictions** are problems an individual may experience in involvement in life situations.

**Environmental Factors** make up the physical, social, and attitudinal environment in which people live and conduct their lives.