As I watched the opening ceremony of the recent Beijing Paralympic Games, the occupational therapist in me felt somewhat unsettled. Although I enjoyed the ceremony, I kept asking why those games were treated differently to the Olympic Games. Television was essentially taken over during the Olympics, yet the Paralympics received only sporadic coverage. Both events are a competition between elite athletes, yet one is called the Olympics and the other the Paralympics. The medal tallies for recent games show that the Team GB medal haul at the Paralympics dwarfs that at the Olympics, yet I suspect the two teams have different experiences as they step off the plane on their return home.

To what extent does this situation, one in which discrimination on the basis of difference is institutionalised and accepted internationally, reflect the spirit of the Olympic Movement? Apparently, ‘every individual must have the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination of any kind’ and ‘any form of discrimination … is incompatible’ with the Olympic Movement (International Olympic Committee 2007, p11). The segregation of able-bodied and disabled athletes, therefore, seems contradictory to the principles of Olympism. Perhaps it is done to ‘protect’ disabled athletes or, with disabled athletes reaping the medals, maybe it protects the egos of able-bodied athletes. Perhaps it is a remnant of a bygone age that now needs to be questioned, or perhaps it has real value to disabled athletes.

It is not easy to ignore the fact that London will host the 2012 Olympics – and do not forget the Paralympics. I suspect, however, that most occupational therapists have not considered the opportunities presented by the invasion of London by elite athletes, coaches, media and spectators from around the world. London 2012 could be a powerful time to make others aware of the occupational injustice in our world. We could raise interest by arguing that the segregation of able-bodied and disabled athletes is an example of occupational apartheid. We could question why a world-class athlete such as Oscar Pistorius is excluded from the Olympics simply because his physical body is different. We could argue that in a world striving to achieve peace and to unite diverse groups of people, the division perpetuated by the Olympics-Paralympics split is simply outdated and divisive.

Occupational therapists are not naturally political and generally do not like to rock the boat. However, as professionals we have a duty to engage with, and at times even to initiate, debates about the issues facing society. An occupational perspective has much to offer the world and the time has come to be proactive in seeking out opportunities to contribute occupational therapy’s unique perspective. London 2012 and the segregation of elite athletes based on the characteristics of their bodies seems as good a place as any to start, and the right campaign will be certain to attract worldwide attention.


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