

Disabled girl has rights, too

Wednesday, January 24, 2007

Re: Don't rush to judge disabled girl's parents, Jan. 18.

Arthur Schafer's defence of the deliberate mutilation of Ashley is in many ways a rehash of the same arguments used by others to defend this horrific procedure, and traces back to rationalizations about past violations of people with disabilities, such as the 2,800 forced sexual sterilizations performed in Alberta from 1928 to 1972.

If not for the negative optics of being associated with the similar practices of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime, the scope of these eugenically motivated activities may well have expanded in the postwar era.

Arguments in favour of such practices boil down to the suggestion that it is reasonable to dilute the rights of individuals in proportion to their inability to have a say in what is done to them. This is about power, and like people with disabilities before her who have suffered such brutalization, Ashley has none.

What such arguments also tend to do is engage in blatant contradictions in the search to justify such practices under the pretense of a "loving act." According to Mr. Shafer, Ashley is "incapable of self-awareness" and therefore the human rights that are important to the rest of us could not "conceivably matter to her." Therefore, there is nothing "undignified" about surgically altering her body and permanently stunting her growth.

Mr. Shafer argues that the parents and the medical team were acting reasonably because the operation would make it possible for her to live a "comparatively pain-free existence in the comfort of her own home." He said that this was an act of love and concern for Ashley's well-being because the path of personal convenience would have been to "place" Ashley in an institution or group home.

Interesting. She has no self-awareness, so cutting off her breast buds and stunting her growth is of no consequence, yet at the same time placing her in institutional care is seen as a less loving choice. If Ashley has no self-awareness, what does it matter where she lives? And to take the argument to its inevitable and horrific conclusion, why does Ashley's existence matter at all?

It matters because she is a human being.

Allegedly, her "mental age" will always be that of an infant. Well, we don't treat infants as though whatever we do to them is of no consequence. Infants have human rights even though they can't speak for themselves. Why should Ashley have received any less consideration?

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