



'No one's ever going to forget meeting a one-armed girl'

Ellen Keane

Thanks to the Paralympics, I developed discipline and focused on what my body could do, rather than what it couldn't

Having a disability isn't as terrible as it may seem. Of course, there are a lot of bad things to deal with, but there are also a lot of good things that "able-bodied" people don't get.

I was born without my left arm from below the elbow. The medical term used is Dismelia and it is defined as: "The condition of having missing, extra or distorted limbs due to congenital factors [at birth]."

Unfortunately for my parents, they were never given a reason why it happened, it was just one of those things.

In my 23 years, I've encountered a lot due to my disability.

So I've decided to use this column to share my experiences with you because it's important to look for the positives in situations that can create so much frustration and anger.

Here are just a few of the best and worst things about having one hand.

Best: The Paralympic Games

The Games is the story of my life so far. I had a talent for swimming at a young age and I was fortunate enough to find coaches who treated me the same as any other athlete.

Because of them (and of course my parents) I was able to set goals, train hard every day, travel all over the world for competitions and meet some extraordinary people. Because of the Paralympics, I developed discipline and a confidence that helped me to embrace my disability and focus on what my body could do, rather than what it couldn't.

My body is strong – having one hand doesn't change that.

Worst: Putting on a racing suit

As a swimmer, I have specific racing suits for competition. These racing suits may be the reason for my retirement one day just because they are so tight and so difficult to get into.

"Able-bodied" female athletes take roughly 10-15 minutes to get into a brand new racing suit. I take double that.

And sometimes I can't get into my suit alone.

All dignity goes out the window when you have your bare bum in your coaches face as she attempts to help you pull up your suit.

(Thank you, Hayley.)

■ Ellen Keane, right, celebrates with silver medallist Paulina Wozniak of Poland and gold winner Katarina Roxon of Canada after receiving her bronze for the Women's 100m Breaststroke SB8 at the Olympic Aquatics Stadium during the Paralympic Games in Rio in 2016.

PHOTOGRAPH: PAUL MOHAN/SPORTSFILE VIA GETTY IMAGES



A weekly column by writers with a disability

Best: Half-price nails

My beauty routine is cheaper than those with two hands! I'm obviously not going to pay full price to get my nails done, but I do always check in advance when I make my appointment. It can be a little bit awkward asking, "Can I have half price?" and then having to explain the fact I only have one hand. Salons are usually sound – I've yet to encounter somewhere that refuses this and the girls seem to appreciate that little break they get when they should be looking after another hand.

Worst: People staring

I never noticed that I was different to anyone else until I began to notice society and

how much people stare. Seriously, when you are an adult it is not cool to gawk at a 10-year-old kid for being different. Because of this, I developed really low self-esteem and hid my arm beneath sleeves for the majority of my teenage years. As I was only missing half an arm a lot of people didn't notice that I was different so it was easy to hide, it was easy to appear "normal".

I developed extreme anxiety when I was out in public and even in school. I was terrified to be stared at, to be rejected for being different, and created this idea in my head that society would think I was a freak.

It wasn't until I started college that I had the confidence to go out in public sleeveless. Swimming gave me this confidence as there was nowhere to hide so I had to try to transfer this confidence to everyday life.

The first time I did go without sleeves was the scariest day of my life, but it was so liberating. I haven't looked back since.

Best: Being unique

These days everyone is striving to be unique. Once I finally accepted my body, I realised how lucky I actually was. I could stand out from the crowd without even meaning to. This gave me an advantage over others when trying to get someone's attention or trying to be remembered. No one's ever going to forget meeting a one-armed girl so I try to make that a good thing.

Every cloud . . .

Follow Ellen's journey to the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games on Instagram and Twitter – @keane_ellen

Sexual health, if you are living with a disability, is not a level playing field



Louise Bruton

We have come so far in reducing the stigma and misinformation around sexual health, but those living with a disability are still banging on doors for equal access

As the conversation around sexual health slowly becomes more honest and more mainstream – rather than festering as the Catholic guilt-ridden, shameful affair that it once was – there's still a level of privacy and ease that people want when they're going into a clinic for an appointment.

With free walk-in services in different clinics and hospitals across the country, it's never been easier to keep a check on your own personal sexual health, but this still isn't the case for people living with physical disabilities.

When we visit sexual health clinics, the eternal battle against protected buildings rages on, as a large number of the clinics are located in old Georgian buildings, with steps and stairs providing an immediate obstacle.

While some of the newer clinics, or hospital-based ones, can boast glamorous things like lifts – ooh! – and automatic doors – aah!, the examination tables that are often

used for smear tests and STI screenings cannot be lowered to assist those with restricted mobility. If you are sexually active, you are encouraged to be tested for STIs and HIV annually, but if you are sexually active and disabled, the lack of information online regarding the access facilities in different clinics may delay your visit. This exclusion not only affects our health but psychologically, it can make a big impact us.

As consenting adults, should we not be as sexually active as our non-disabled peers?

The lack of access information online for these clinics is limited, and phoning around can be quite frustrating, especially if you are feeling anxious. As an aptly scheduled Valentine's Special for my own access blog *Legless in Dublin*, I rounded up information on various sexual health services available in Dublin that have access facilities and services for disabled people.

Unsurprisingly, it's not a long list. The

fully accessible locations just so happen to include Dublin's largest sexual health clinics and they are located in Beaumont Hospital, The GUIDE Clinic in St James' Hospital and Mater Misericordiae Hospital. These three clinics offer free STI and HIV testing. Himerus Health is a private sexual health and STI testing clinic in Dublin 8 and it is also fully accessible.

When it comes to locations that are less accessible, there are ways to still use their services, while retaining an element of privacy. The three Well Woman Centres in Dublin offer appointments for STI testing, smear testing, family planning, crisis pregnancies, menopause consultation, counselling and many other essential services. While their Liffey Street clinic is not wheelchair accessible, their clinic in Northside Shopping Centre is. Their Pembroke Road

■ Louise Bruton: 'I rounded up information on various sexual health services available in Dublin that have access facilities and services for disabled people.'

PHOTOGRAPH: AIDAN CRAWLEY

location has three steps down to the front door, but they say that they can assist their clients however they need.

The Gay Men's Health Service Clinic on Baggot Street is a great example of a place that has fully considered the privacy and access needs for their disabled clients. For their free walk-in appointments on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings, wheelchair access is available from the Haddington Road entrance and they suggest that you text them on 087 941 0934 to arrange this. They also offer ISL Interpreters, but you must text them at least one day in advance to book an interpreter.

Using a more casual approach, KnowNow conduct free rapid HIV tests in non-clinical settings around Ireland like bars, saunas and clubs. One of their Dublin locations is the ground level of The George, which is completely wheelchair accessible. Testing also takes place in the basement of Pantibar for privacy, but if a person with limited mobility wants to use this service and they are comfortable getting tested on the ground level, that can be arranged.

When it comes to sex and disability, there's a space in the media that narrows in on the more personal side of things, bordering on voyeurism and fetishisation, instead of looking at how a lack of access, privacy and anonymity can actually affect the sexual health and confidence of disabled people.

Basic healthcare should be an easy thing to achieve in 2018.

We've come so far in reducing the stigma and misinformation around sexual health, but, if you're living with a disability, we're still banging on doors for equal access.



A new weekly column by writers with a disability

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A weekly column by writers with a disability

There are 847 accessible taxis in Dublin. Sometimes it's very hard to get just one

Aisling Glynn

You shouldn't have to rely on 'luck' or the kindness of others to go about your day

Many people reading this will remember watching Jake Carter and Karen Byrne win the finale of *Dancing with the Stars* in recent weeks. Karen's sister Linda will remember the night for more than one reason.

That evening, Linda got together with family and friends to cheer Karen on.

Being too familiar with the reality of finding an accessible taxi, Linda, who uses a wheelchair, started making phone calls well in advance of going home. She then waited on the side of the road in the cold. For three hours.

Linda had phoned 37 taxi numbers. According to National Transport Authority figures issued that week, there are 847 accessible taxis in operation in Dublin. Maybe Linda was just unlucky?

Unfortunately, my experience tells me otherwise. As a person with a disability, living and working in west Clare, transport is an absolute necessity.

As an able-bodied teenager, I often took the bus to Ennis on a Saturday morning. Once I started using a wheelchair this was no longer an option.

As an adult with a disability, my transport needs have changed. I need transport to get to work every day and to attend medical appointments. A few weeks ago my car broke down. It's a short journey to work, but there's no such thing as a wheelchair-accessible taxi in west Clare. There are 847 in Dublin.

Adapted car

That's encouraging, if you travel to Dublin regularly, as I do. I'm very lucky to have an adapted car to get to the train station in Limerick. Irish Rail recommend giving 24 hours notice in advance of a train journey as a ramp has to be placed over the steps to access the train.

The staff who assist are always helpful and kind. But it can happen that someone forgets to make a call and you can find yourself waiting and worrying and hoping that a ramp arrives.

■ **Aisling Glynn (with her dog Gina): "There were three of us making calls. We also had a taxi app running. It's interesting to watch the cars disappear when you select the accessible feature on the app."**

Not long ago, my sister stepped on to a train to check for a ramp. As she did, the doors closed behind her and the train took off, leaving my other sister and I on the platform (admittedly laughing).

The kindness of others has been a recurring theme in this series. A couple of years ago, in Dublin, I met Charlie. Charlie drives an accessible taxi and he gave me his mobile number. Recently, Charlie was on holidays so I booked a taxi in advance. A standard taxi arrived. Again, the driver was very nice and together we started making calls. It was 2pm, but it still took over an hour for an accessible car to arrive.

A few hours later, on my return journey, the process started again. This time, there were three of us making calls. We also had a taxi app running. It's interesting to watch the cars disappear when you select the accessible feature on the app.

An hour and a half later, our taxi finally arrived. Getting in took some manoeuvring because the driver had to move the spare tyre from where he was storing it on the ramp, but we were soon on our way.

On my next trip to Dublin, after finishing work I stayed in town to have dinner. Like Linda, before finishing, we started making calls. Charlie was on a rare evening off.

Two hours later, I texted him to see if he had any numbers I could try. He rang and told me he was on the way to collect his wife from the gym. Not taking no for an answer, he collected his wife then drove straight into the city centre for us.

That's kindness. There's also luck. You can be in the right place at the right time and an accessible taxi might just drive by when you need it. But you can't rely on luck. Like the night the battery of my wheelchair died after circling the streets for hours looking for a taxi.

One finally arrived – at 7.30am the following morning. Luckily, it was mid-July and we made the most of it. When I was younger my family and friends would help me in and out of cars and vans and standard taxis. We had lots of great nights out. But one night, while being lifted, my leg got caught in the wheelchair resulting in a broken knee and a cast for three months. That was unlucky.

Last week I had to travel to Dublin for work. This time my journey was a short one from Heuston to the Four Courts.

No taxi required. The doors of the Luas opened and I drove straight on. No notice. No portable ramps. No waiting. No stress. Equal access for all. Luckily for me.