



CHRONIC ILLNESS  
INCLUSION PROJECT

16th November 2020

**To the BBC team involved in making *Crip Tales: The Real Deal*,**

We are writing to convey the outpouring of hurt and distress from the chronic illness community, as well as other groups of disabled people, in response to the 'The Real Deal', the second episode of the *Crip Tales* series on BBC Four. Our aim is one of constructive engagement with the team involved in producing this episode, and our hope is that programming at the BBC involves and reflects a broader, more inclusive experience of disability in future.

The Chronic Illness Inclusion Project (CIIP), which initiated this letter, strongly welcomes the commissioning of programmes written by, produced by and starring disabled people. Other episodes in the *Crip Tales* series are a brilliant showcase of talent in our community and should be celebrated. We recognise the excellent work and long-standing activism of those involved in *Crip Tales*, especially Liz Carr. However, our high hopes for this series were shattered by the episode 'The Real Deal', which our supporters have described as 'horrifying', 'sickening' and 'terrifying'.

There was much that we wanted to applaud in this episode. Like all other episodes in the series, it had a powerful performance, and it deftly exposed the farcical nature of PIP assessments, which have negatively affected all disabled people. However, in its treatment of the neighbour 'Nigel' as the suspected 'fake' disabled person, it was terribly ill-judged. The character of Nigel could have provided an opportunity to unravel cruel stereotypes of disability fakery, to expose the harm and damage they have caused to so many people with invisible and fluctuating health conditions, and to offer precious insight into our lived experiences. Instead, 'Nigel' seemed to conflate invisible disability with benefit fraud, and this one-dimensional stereotype was left unchallenged. This depiction has been deeply wounding, not only to people with chronic illness, but those living with mental distress and other forms of hidden impairment.

Much of Nigel's supposedly suspicious behaviour is in fact common for people with chronic illness or other hidden impairments. Many have fluctuating conditions, with both good and bad days. They might be able to go out one morning and appear 'fine', but then later be struggling with so much pain and fatigue that they are unable even to move around their home. Ability is not always a simple binary. In addition, the general public needs to understand that a person

who can sometimes walk unaided is not 'faking' when they use a mobility aid to help them manage their energy levels. As one chronically ill viewer has put it:

*I frequently carry my stick. I take it because dizziness, nausea and imbalance can come upon me quickly with no warning, but I walk fine. Other days I can't get round my own home. I can walk. Sometimes quite far, but then tomorrow I can't string a sentence together or remember how to cook food.\**

Comments from the chronic illness community make clear the damage done by this episode leaving the 'fake' disability stereotype unchallenged:

*It gives the impression that faking an assessment is easy and therefore must be widespread.*

*Nothing undid the ideas from the beginning that going out everyday or carrying your mobility aid (or shock maybe not even having one) is indicative of lying about ability.*

*Pitting disabilities against one another along with the notion that you can't be physically disabled unless you are virtually confined to a wheelchair.*

### **Satire that misfired?**

We believe that the intention of the episode may have been to satirise the notion of 'real' versus 'fake' disability. However, the viewing public at this time is not equipped with a nuanced understanding of disability from which to grasp this satire. There has been no public discussion of the complexity or diversity of experiences of impairment and disability. Rather, the TV-viewing public has been fed a steady diet of so-called benefits cheats for entertainment. Therefore, instead of satirising the trope of disabled fakery, by failing to present alternative explanations for Nigel's behaviour, people with chronic illness feel that this episode merely reproduces ignorance and prejudice and reinforces oppressive stereotypes.

*I fear the general public will take what they see and hear in this video at face value, thus adding weight to the notion that a large number of claimants are faking it.*

Even more importantly, it left people with invisible and fluctuating impairments extremely distressed at how they are represented in the media and more fearful than ever of being targets of harassment or fraud reporting:

*Some days I leave my house for a short walk with my stick, because I need it. Some days I don't need it. Every single day I feel fear that someone will notice I don't always use it and assume I'm faking my disability.*

*In the early days of my muscle condition I had to take a walking stick with me because I would gradually get very tired walking. At the start of my walk I could pretty much twirl it in the air (FAKER!). I'd only be using it "properly" on my way back. For short walks I didn't use it at all.*

*The thought that my neighbours would be reporting me to the DWP is quite terrifying.*

### **Systemic disbelief and the social model of disability**

We would like to share our research report [Energy impairment and disability inclusion](#) with the team behind 'The Real Deal'. Our research was grounded in a social model of disability that identifies socially-constructed barriers to inclusion and participation, whether in material environments or cultural attitudes. Our report concluded that attitudes of disbelief, of the sort expressed by the character of 'Meg', are in themselves a disabling barrier for people with energy limiting chronic illness, and this kind of disbelief is systemic and causes deep levels of oppression and harm.

Many of our participants expressed fear of surveillance and policing of 'fake' disability, which has a significant impact on their daily lives. These are the voices of some of our participants:

*If I [undertake therapeutic walking as medically advised] you can guarantee that someone will see me and think I'm lying, I'm faking, I'm making a false claim for disability mobility allowance.*

*I was talking to an old friend once about getting my motability car, and she said, repeatedly, "But you're not disabled though" in a blunt, accusatory way... I was quite upset about her tone and her insistence, and I only challenged her lightly. I hated that she made me feel like a fraud and made me worried that she would report me to the DWP.*

*The first time I used a shop mobility scooter, the person in the store when collecting said loudly 'You don't need this!'. I've never hired one again.*

This experience of fear and hostility is widespread among disabled people of all impairment types. [Research into disabled people's participation in sport by the Activity Alliance](#) shows almost half of disabled people fear losing their benefits if they are seen to be physically active.

Our criticism of 'The Real Deal' is absolutely not intended as a personal attack on those involved in its making, nor to divide different groups of disabled people. It is rather to make a plea for mutual understanding, in the furthering of unity and solidarity among disabled people as a community. Our followers thought the stereotype embodied in Nigel "felt Othering and cruel". Perhaps the most wounding aspect of The Real Deal was that the conflation of invisible disability with fraud came from other disabled people. One commenter said:

*We need the wider disability community to take us seriously. This was scary as it felt like maybe they don't.*

We would welcome a dialogue with members of the production team behind a Real Deal. We also ask that in future disability programming, the BBC ensures inclusion and representation of all impairment types, including energy limiting chronic illness and mental distress. We are happy to share our research with the BBC and to offer assistance with any future programming.

Sincerely,

Chronic Illness Inclusion Project  
Shaping Our Lives  
Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC)  
Recovery in the Bin  
Centre for Welfare Reform  
MEActionUK  
National Survivor User Network  
Citizen Network  
Manchester Disabled People Against Cuts  
Leeds Disabled People's Organisation

#### **About the Chronic Illness Inclusion Project**

The CIIP is a voice for disabled people with energy limiting chronic illness, energy impairment and chronic pain. We are currently evolving from a disabled-led research project under the [DRILL programme](#) to an independent user-led organisation with approximately 1.5K supporters. We represent a large group of disabled people. One in three disabled people in the UK reports impairment of stamina, breathing or fatigue, according to [government disability data](#), and this number sadly looks set to grow with the emergence of Long Covid. Although our experiences of energy impairment as disabled people are far from unusual, they are rarely heard outside of our communities. The CIIP exists to challenge negative perceptions towards people with chronic illness, and to promote our rights as disabled people, especially by working alongside other Disabled People's Organisations.

\*All quotes in this letter (unless otherwise stated) are excerpts from responses to a Twitter thread <https://twitter.com/chronicinclude/status/1324702825381830658?s=20> and Facebook post <https://www.facebook.com/ChronicInclude/posts/1142929709442368>