The international symbol of disability is the wheelchair and the stereotype of a person with disability is a young man with paraplegia. While these images are very familiar, at the same time we know that this is not an accurate picture of the diversity of global disability. Whereas 15% of the population are affected by disability, less than 0.1% of the population have spinal cord injury.

However, spinal cord injury is particularly devastating, for two reasons. First, it often strikes out of the blue. A driver is tired and inebriated late at night, and veers off the road, resulting in a roll-over crash and consequent tetraplegia. The teenager dives into a pool, only to break her neck. A workman falls from scaffolding, and becomes paraplegic. An earthquake strikes and a person’s back is injured by falling masonry. A middle aged woman is paralysed due to pressure from a tumour. In all these examples, someone in the prime of their life becomes disabled in an instant. None of us are immune from this risk.

Second, the consequences of SCI are commonly either premature mortality or at best social exclusion. Trauma care systems are frequently inadequate. For many, access to high quality rehabilitation and assistive devices is unavailable. Ongoing health care is lacking, which means that a person with spinal cord injury is likely to die within a few years from urinary tract infections or pressure sores. Even when individuals are lucky enough to receive the health and rehabilitation care they require, they are likely to be denied access to the education and employment which could enable them to regain their independence and make a contribution to their families and their society.

None of these devastating outcomes is necessary. The message of this report is that spinal cord injury is preventable; that spinal cord injury is survivable; and that spinal cord injury need not prevent good quality of life and full contribution to society. The report contains the best available scientific evidence about strategies to reduce the incidence of spinal cord injury, particularly from traumatic causes. The report also discusses how the health system can respond effectively to people who are injured. Finally, the report discusses how personal adjustment and relationships can be supported, how barriers in the environment can be removed, and how individuals with spinal cord injury can gain access to schools, universities and workplaces.

We can turn spinal cord injury from a threat into an opportunity. This has two dimensions. First, spinal cord injury challenges almost every aspect of the health system. So enabling health systems to react effectively to the challenge of spinal cord injury will mean that they can respond better to many other types of illness and injury. Second, a world which is hospitable to people with spinal cord injury in particular will inevitably be more inclusive of disability in general. Improved accessibility and greater availability of assistive devices will help millions of the world’s disabled and older people. And finally, of course, the word “opportunity” signals the better lives and the productive contribution to which people with spinal cord injury rightly aspire, and which we can help them to attain, if only we have the political will and the organizational commitment. As earlier with the World report on disability, so now with International Perspectives on Spinal Cord Injury, this report has potential to change lives and open doors. I urge the world’s policy-makers to pay attention to its findings.