Chapter 11 - Other Health Impairments

Definition under IDEA of Other Health Impairments

According to IDEA, an Other Health Impairment means:

*having limited strength, vitality or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment, that is due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, and sickle cell anemia; and adversely affects a student's educational performance*

Overview of Other Health Impairments

Many conditions and diseases can significantly affect a student’s health and ability to function successfully in school. Most health impairments are chronic conditions; that is, they are always present, or they recur. By contrast, and acute condition develops quickly with intense symptoms that last for a relatively short period of time. To be served under the OHI category, the student’s health condition must limit strength, vitality, or alertness to such a degree that the student’s educational progress is adversely affected. More than 200 specific health impairments exist, and most are rare (Turnbull, Turnbull & Wehmeyer; cited in Pierangelo & Giuliani).

It should be noted that within the category of OHI is Attention Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder (AD/HD). Only time will tell whether AD/HD finds its way to another special education category or whether it becomes a category of its own in the future. Presently, the inclusion of AD/HD has caused a significant increase in the size of the category (U.S. Department of Education).

Prevalence of Other Health Impairments

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Other Health Impairments represent approximately 12.0 percent of all students having a classification in special education.
Characteristics of Students with Other Health Impairments

Some general characteristics faced by individuals with other health impairments may include but not limited to:

- Fatigue
- Mobility issues
- Issues involving attention
- Coordination difficulties
- Muscle weakness
- Frequent absences or lateness’s to school
- Stamina
- Inability to concentrate for long periods of time

Procedures and Assessment Measures used to diagnose Other Health Impairments

If a student is suspected of having an Other Health Impairment, the following evaluation shall be conducted:

(A) A medical statement or a health assessment statement, indicating a diagnosis of a health impairment or a description of the impairment, and a statement that the student's condition is permanent or is expected to last for more than 60 calendar days;

(B) Assessments to determine the impact of the suspected disability:

   (i) On the student's educational performance when the student is at the age of eligibility for kindergarten through age 21; or

   (ii) On the student's developmental progress when the student is age three through the age of eligibility for kindergarten; and

(C) Additional evaluations or assessments that are necessary to identify the student's educational needs. If a student is suspected of having a health impairment under the definition set forth in IDEA, the following assessment measures should also be considered:

   a. An observation by a team member other than the student’s general education teacher of the student’s academic performance in a general classroom setting; or in the case of a student less than school age or out of school, an observation by a team member conducted in an age-appropriate environment;

   b. A developmental history, if needed

   c. An assessment of intellectual ability
d. Other assessments of the characteristics of speech and language impairments if the student exhibits impairments in any one or more of the following areas: cognition, fine motor, perceptual motor, communication, social or emotional, and perception or memory. These assessments shall be completed by specialists knowledgeable in the specific characteristics being assessed:

e. A review of cumulative records, previous individualized education programs or individualized family service plans and teacher collected work samples;

**Eligibility for a Diagnosis of an Other Health Impairment**

In order to identify and be determined as eligible for special education services as a student with an Orthopedic Impairment, the IEP Committee shall document that the following standards have been met.

1. The IEP Committee has obtained a medical statement or a health assessment statement indicating a diagnosis of health impairment or a description of the impairment, and that the student’s condition is permanent or is expected to last for more than 60 days.

2. The student exhibits limited strength, vitality or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment.

3. The student’s limited strength, vitality or alertness is due to a chronic or acute health problem.

4. The student’s condition is permanent or is expected to last for more than 60 calendar days.

5. The student’s disability has an adverse impact on the student’s educational performance when the student is at the age of eligibility for kindergarten through age 21, or has an adverse impact on the student’s developmental progress when the student is age three through kindergarten; and,

6. The student needs special education services
Final Thoughts

When responsible educators encounter diseases and conditions they know little about, they seek out all the information they need to provide an appropriate education to students involved (Deutsch-Smith). One of the main considerations in the education of these students is the use of the team approach in developing and carrying out a student's educational program. The team generally includes the parent/guardians, teachers, medical professionals, and health-related professionals such as a physical therapist.

Parent/guardians are critical members of the team and should be involved in all educational decisions. Sirvis noted that the team should design a program that meets the needs of the student in five basic goal areas: "(a) physical independence, including mastery of daily living skills; (b) self-awareness and social maturation; (c) communication; (d) academic growth; and (e) life skills training" (p. 400). Interdisciplinary services such as occupational and physical therapy and speech and language therapy are of prime importance for youngsters who have physical disabilities.

It is often necessary to modify and adapt the school environment to make it accessible, safe, and less restrictive since discriminating architecture doesn’t have to discriminate (Leibrock & Terry). Accessibility guidelines are readily available, and when these guidelines are followed the environment becomes easier for the student to manage independently.

Finally, what role teachers should play in the medical management of students is an ongoing and contentious issue (Temple) since teachers are being called on to assume more responsibilities for the medical management of their students (Heller et al.).

According to the Starbright Foundation (cited in Turnbull et al.), there are numerous complex challenges facing students with health impairments. Common issues are: “loss of sense of control, lack of understanding about the condition, fear, worry, anxiety, stress, anger, and guilt, changes in family dynamics, isolation, isolation, medical noncompliance, boredom, depression, pain, decreased self-esteem, negative body image, and impact on identity and social interactions, including those at school”.