

Handicapped parking

By BRIAN LOCKHART

During the hockey season I usually attend at least one Junior level game each week, and sometimes as many as two or three, depending on what's going on in the hockey world.

Because of my regular attendance each week ? one team I have been covering for 17 years ? I get to know many of the regular fans and parents who also attend almost every game.

A couple of years ago I met a man who came to the games every week because his nephew was on the team. We used to stand at the top of the viewing area and discuss the game as well as other things.

This man was physically disabled. It was a birth defect, he told me, and he had a lot of difficulty doing things most of us take for granted. He used crutches to walk but it was tough for him. Going up the stairs to the stands in the arena was impossible for him and he would have to take the elevator.

One week the team was playing an out-of-town game.

When he arrived at the arena, all the handicapped parking spaces were full. Because it was a playoff game the rest of the parking lot was pretty much full as well and they were forced to park a considerable distance from the front door of the arena.

My friend made it about half way before his disability forced him to stop. As it was relayed to me by another fan who was with them, his brother had to step in and almost carry him, a full grown man, into the arena.

The whole idea of handicapped parking spaces is allow people with disabilities the courtesy of easy access to a building when walking or using a wheelchair or other disability device is difficult.

The arena I attend has seven handicapped parking spaces in the front row of parking directly in front of the main entrance of the building. There are additional handicapped spaces in the side parking lot, although I'm not sure why as that location is even farther than the second row of parking in the main lot.

For several years now I attend these Friday night games, and every single week those seven handicapped parking spaces are occupied. Every single week.

And yet, rarely if ever, do I see anyone with a wheelchair, walker, cane, or even a limp, at these games.

I am well aware that not all physical handicaps are visible, so that is taken into consideration.

However, what are the reasonable odds of everyone having a non-visible handicap using these parking spots every week?

I decided to see who all these handicapped people are. For a couple of weeks in a row I went to the game a little early and sat in the lobby that looks on onto the parking lot.

Sure enough, the handicapped parking spots filled up fast. However, none of the people that I saw exit those vehicles looking remotely physically challenged.

There was a single young guy, a younger couple, then a family of five who leaped out of the car with the kids running toward the arena entrance and a couple of healthy looking parents jogging behind them.

Taking a casual stroll along the row of vehicles showed that everyone of them had a handicapped permit on the dashboard.

One of the vehicles was an off-road 4x4 that was jacked up so high it would be difficult for an able-bodied person climb into the cab, let alone a person with a disability.

It was obvious that most, if not all, of these people were borrowing someone else's permit.

?Hey grandma, we're going to the arena. We'll need your permit!?

How lazy do you have to be to actually take up a parking spot reserved for a disabled person rather than walk an extra 20 metres?

According to Service Ontario, accessible parking permits are issued to a person, not a vehicle, and the person must have been in the vehicle using the parking space.

Maybe it's time for authorities to show up at some of these venues and when observing a group of apparently healthy people taking up a parking space, simply ask who is the holder of the permit.

I'm pretty sure the local coffers would benefit nicely on the first weekend of such a blitz. The fine for illegal parking in a handicapped spot is \$150.00.

Last year in Toronto, the police did a spot-check at a mall and found 12 of 16 drivers were using other people's permits.

Designated handicapped parking spots are there for people who need it ? not for people who are simply too lazy to walk and obviously have a total disregard for the needs of others.