

Disabled rights in the spotlight of the ESCIF congress

ESCIF's member organisations were able to meet face-to-face in Switzerland's Nottwil for the first time in a long while. Last year, the congress was not held due to the corona situation, but the annual assembly of delegates was held via email communication instead.

Making sure the disabled rights come true

The theme of the seminar was the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Professor Markus Shefer, a member in the U. N. Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, explained the process that is used in making sure the disabled rights come true. The committee collects a report from its member nations concerning disabled rights and concrete actions implementing them. Shadow reports are also collected from advocacy groups. Having read the reports, the committee inquires with the nations and has a dialogue with both the nations and the groups. Finally, each nation will receive recommendations on the most important actions that would improve the situation.

The actualisation of the rights has sparked a lot of conversation. The chairman of National Council of Disabled Persons' Organizations Slovenia, Borut Sever, said that Slovenia has defined a quota of an acceptable percentage of disabled persons to be employed by large employers, but even the nation itself does not follow its own recommendations. He mentioned having participated in the creation of the previous shadow report, which had 66 pages.

During the assessment of the Europe-wide situation, it was noted that public transport and buildings are generally accessible within the capital cities of countries, but the situation is worse in long-distance transport and in the countryside. Switzerland has ongoing legal proceedings on new train carts, in which the ramps had a 15-degree (or even higher) incline. Another example came from Austria, where a concert hall had accessible bathrooms, but they were located upstairs without elevators.

A need for accessible electric car charging stations

Erik Berndsson of the Swedish member organisation (Personskade Förbundet RTP) displayed problems with the current charging stations, in which accessibility has not been taken into account. Payment terminals are too high up and they are sometimes obstructed by fences, or the lanes of commotion are too narrow. This prevents wheelchair users from charging their electric cars without assistance. The Swedish suggested that ESCIF should initiate an international project in which the accessibility of charging stations is improved. The motion gained a lot of support and an associated project group is being assembled.

Challenges in treating spinal cord injury

In Germany, the acute and sub-acute phase of spinal cord injury treatment has been cut back and patients are being discharged earlier than before. In some countries, injured people are not rehabilitated to conditions that allow employment, but personalized help for living at home is offered instead. In Germany, when sending a patient home from rehabilitation, they must decide if they want a disability pension or to get back to working life. This is too early an occasion for the decision, as the person is still in crisis and the rehabilitation is ongoing. The worst situation is in Albania, where a person is entitled to a free 15-day stay at a hospital following an injury, after which they are personally responsible for any treatment. If one cannot afford it, they are sent home. According to the law, a disabled person should receive a wheelchair or an applicable utility, but it is denied from them due to the country lacking the needed tools.

Nottwil's impressive rehabilitation center

The participants were able to familiarize themselves with Nottwil and its enormous building complex. It includes a hospital (with surgery), a spinal cord injury rehabilitation center, a research center, a hotel, and training grounds for parasports. In Switzerland, the first treatment and rehabilitation period usually lasts from 4 to 5 months for paraplegics and from 8 to 10 months for tetraplegics. The center employs 10 peer counselors. Due to the corona situation, a tour of the hospital and the rehabilitation center was not possible, but we were told that there are currently 180 rehabilitates and over 1'800 employees in the facility.

Covid has created other problems in Nottwil as well. Previously, it was possible to challenge rehabilitates to try their limits more and experiment on various things, whereas now covid has made, for example, indoors group activities more difficult. Consequently, the rehabilitation center has decided to give rehabilitates weekends off, during which time they can experiment on managing on their own at home and thus gain a clearer perspective on what additional skills they still require. Around 60% of the rehabilitates are re-employed.

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