

REHABILITATION OF PARAPLEGICS IN AUSTRIA

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IN spring 1951 when I took part in a course on 'Rehabilitation in England', which was organised by the World Health Organisation, the visit to the National Spinal Injuries Centre in Aylesbury, run by Dr. Guttman, was among the most impressive events. For all course-participants, who came from seven different nations, it was a revelation to see what success Guttman had achieved with these patients.

Prior to my visit to England I was appointed medical director of the Rehabilitation Centre at Tobelbad, so that I could take into consideration the special needs of paraplegics after my return from England.

On 12 February 1952 I reported at the Berufsgenossenschaftlichen meeting in Stuttgart, for the first time at a meeting in German-speaking countries, about Guttman's work. On 23 October 1953 I gave an account at the University of Freiburg in Breisgau at a similar meeting of the first 85 cases who had been admitted since then. (At the University of Freiburg Guttman had carried out part of his medical studies.)

Following these reports I was invited to many congresses in Western and Eastern Germany, Switzerland and Italy. I considered myself a disciple of Guttman on the continent. As the Allgemeine Unfallversicherungsanstalt already controlled six modern accident hospitals and also 33 emergency departments shortly after the war, the primary phase of treatment of rehabilitation of paraplegics was carried out in the accident hospitals, which are in all the federal states of Austria. Each accident hospital has several assistants, each of whom has to serve several months in the Rehabilitation Centre, Tobelbad to complete his training. No physician becomes a chief-physician unless he has spent a period in Tobelbad during his residency. These 'oberärzte' teach the staff in the accident hospitals, thereby improving the primary treatment. Paraplegic patients, coming from our own institutions, rarely have decubital ulcers or urinary tract infections, whereas 51 per cent. of patients coming from other institutions still show decubital ulcers.

In July 1954 the first Austrian team took part in the Stoke Mandeville Games. The good results which we achieved in swimming and table tennis incited our people to extend the facilities for sport for the disabled, including paraplegics. As newspapers, radio and television reported the sports events of our patients, a new outlook of the population to the problem of providing occupation for paraplegics was established. At the Para-Olympic Games in 1960 in Rome, 1964 in Tokyo and 1968 in Israel we were represented by many patients and achieved good results.

In the early summer, each year we hold a 'sports week' for the disabled in Schleitens, Styria; and a 'sports week' in Obertraun, Upper Austria, in September. Also every second year a contest for the disabled is held in the sports-centre Hörndlwald near Vienna. Sir Ludwig Guttman could convince himself from the performances in the last year. At numerous sports events in Germany, France and Belgium our paraplegics have taken a successful part. To date about 1300 paraplegics have been treated in Tobelbad.

Thanks to the good foundations laid by Guttman, we can say that of all complete paraplegics about 60 per cent. have an occupation and are fully integrated into society. This figure applies also to Austria.