

THE year 1981 is being devoted to the special problems of disabled people. Statistics show that more than 480 million people in the world live with various disabilities, many of them in states of social dependency.

Those with spinal cord injury constitute one of the most seriously disabled groups, and require special attention in the sphere of pre-hospital care, transport facilities and complex, highly specialised multi-disciplinary organisation, involving the close cooperation of emergency doctors, neuro-surgeons, orthopaedic surgeons, anaesthetists, physiotherapists, physiatrists, occupational therapists, social workers and rehabilitation engineers. Today not only bracing appliances but also wheel-chairs, and various other mechanical, and also electronic equipment are used to create a better life for spinal cord injured persons.

Public Health authorities throughout the world, and especially in developing countries, do not always realise how much should be done to help to prevent the numbers of severely disabled people increasing. During World War II special units for those with spinal paralysis were created, and there is convincing proof that the creation of these specialised units was of great assistance in the overall treatment of wounded people, and facilitated preventive care. Specialised departments need to be created today, when traffic accidents as well as severe injuries due to the rapid development of new technologies are causing more acute bodily injury, including spinal cord trauma.

Many of us spend much time trying to convince our leaders and public organisations about the great importance of being prepared for the hazards of modern living, and of providing education in rehabilitation. During my W.H.O. consultations in many countries, I was able to convince many authorities of the need to be active in these spheres concerned with the disabled.

Under the influence of the late Sir Ludwig Guttman, and others, in 1965 we created the first Polish Department for Neuro-orthopaedics as an integral part of the Rehabilitation Department of the Warsaw School of Medicine. During the period 1965-80, we admitted 1915 patients within the first 24 hours after injury. Such units are being developed in other cities in my country.

The International Medical Society of Paraplegia, with members in many countries throughout the world, is ready to help injured people, utilising the expertise, experience, and scientific achievements of the members. Our contribution should be concentrated on the training and education of staff in the different branches of medicine related to the management of spinal cord injuries. We must fulfil our task of encouraging the creation of special departments and centres for those with paraplegia, and prepare positive programmes aimed at improving the future for disabled people.

Professor MARIAN WEISS, M.D.  
*Poland*