

# Cerebral palsy: the poliomyelitis of the 21st century?

**Dear mediator and co-workers,**

Rehabilitation is a relatively recent topic. Whereas in the last century a lot of attention was at first given to medical care and prevention, in the course of the second half of the 20th century gradually more attention was given to rehabilitation of people with disabilities.

In this process there are considerable differences between countries: some of you reading this will even remark that as far as rehabilitation is concerned, hardly anything has been done in their country or region so far. In large parts of the world, the polio virus had been the major cause of handicaps. The virus ruined millions of lives and thanks to rehabilitation new opportunities could be offered to a large number of people. Over the past decades also mediators of the Liliane Foundation have reported especially about many children with polio. However, gradually we see a change occur, although in this respect there are also big differences between countries. This is because in many parts of the world young children have been vaccinated against polio. As a result, in most countries there have been few new cases over the past years. However, there is still a huge number of people who are paralysed due to polio contracted at a young age and who for instance regularly need new orthopaedic appliances.

Unfortunately, the dramatic fall of the number of polio children does not imply that the number of children with disabilities is decreasing as well. It is a worldwide trend that specifically the group of countless cerebral palsy children becomes more and more visible.

There are a number of explanations for the growth of this group: one is that due to the improved health care in many countries, children that would previously have died, now survive, albeit severely disabled. On the other hand poverty, resulting in severe malnourishment, is a major cause of disability.

Also the fact that people tend less than before to hide the disability of their child (or of themselves) plays a role in the progressing manifestation of this category of children.

Regarding cerebral palsy children, it is important to know that no recovery of the damaged part of the brain is possible. The effects of CP may vary a lot; mobility problems and developmental retardation are the most frequent ones. Although complete recovery is impossible, suitable rehabilitation may considerably relieve these problems.

## **What is the proper rehabilitation?**

There are two key aspects: in the first place the rehabilitation of the child itself. To this regard some basic questions may be asked, such as: what is the child still capable of? Which experts are at hand for consultation?

*If at all possible, try not to rely only on medical experts but to focus on experts who look at the social side too, who take the child as a whole and its family into consideration.*

Are there any local projects where something is done for other children with this disability? Especially small-scale day-care facilities may contribute greatly to the rehabilitation of these children. In these day-care centres it is for instance possible to train children in their ADL (= Activities of Daily Life) and to teach them to mingle and play with other children. Moreover it is important for parents to be unburdened and not to be always involved with the care for their child; this may also be organised in a simple way when parents take turns in looking after each other's children.

The second key aspect concerns the parents: as mentioned above, not 'solving' the child's problem is the key issue but inciting the parents to try *to cope with the problem*. Involving the parents by listening well to their real problems in daily practice is a prerequisite. Proper coaching and training of parents in handling their child is important. In general, parents greatly appreciate the establishment of parent groups, in which experiences are shared; this might be something you could set up yourself locally. The economic aspect plays a big role too: often the situation may be such that the mother cannot go out working, because the child needs looking after. This causes big additional problems and concerns, especially when there is no other breadwinner in the family. For this reason there is, under certain conditions, the possibility for the parents of these children with severe disabilities to qualify for an IGP (Income-Generating Project) through an application from you as a mediator. You will find an article on this topic elsewhere in this Big Spider.

The Liliane Foundation would like to think along with you in realizing good rehabilitation possibilities for this category of children. However, if there are few or no possibilities in your surroundings *and* if you yourself have certain ideas, we herewith invite you to let us know. After all, creative ideas and dreams are an important engine in our world!

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