**Health: Barrier-free? It depends...**

**A research done by the Inclusive Editorial Team Upper Austria**

Are people with learning difficulties disadvantaged in the health system? Where can they get information about health issues? Do doctors' surgeries and hospitals take care to communicate as barrier-free as possible? The team of the "Inclusive Editorial Team" of Caritas Upper Austria investigated these questions.

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"I go to every doctor alone, also to the hospital. If I don't understand something, I can ask. The doctors also ask if I want to know anything else and if everything fits," says Sandra Selimi, who lives in an assisted living run by Caritas Upper Austria. "I don't always understand everything, but I can ask," says her friend and neighbor Karin Höller "If I still don't understand something, I have it written down. Or I talk about it with my assistant"

Cornelia Pfeiffer and Andreas Knogler from the inclusive editorial team of Caritas Upper Austria asked around in their personal environment in assisted living facilities of Caritas Upper Austria. The answers and also their own experiences show that people with disabilities can definitely count on understanding and support in medical offices and also in hospitals. Assistants confirm this impression - with their experience and service, they also make a significant contribution to ensure good communication: For example, by taking information folders specially compiled for their clients with them when they visit the doctor.

Right to barrier-free access

In principle, people with disabilities in Austria have the right to barrier-free access to health care. This is stipulated in Article 25 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and in the National Action Plan on Disability (2020-2030). Nevertheless, people with cognitive impairments are not systematically considered in the context of accessibility in the health sector. There are building regulations, often also measures for people with impaired vision or blind people. However, there is no general regulation on the use of simple or easy language in medical practices and hospitals. Not only people with learning disabilities would benefit from this, but also people with little knowledge of German and all those who may find themselves in an exceptional situation at the doctor's and have little use for complicated technical terms.

Despite extensive research, the "Inclusive Editorial Team" could not find a useful overview of health information, relevant services and facilities that are geared to the needs of people with disabilities. Although the Austrian Society for Quality Assurance & Quality Management in Medicine (ÖQMed) operates a web platform where medical practices can be searched for by location, speciality and requirements, the results are incomplete or no longer up-to-date.

www.wobinichrichtig.at

Information in easy language is provided, for example, by the Upper Austrian project "Wo bin ich richtig?" (Where am I right?), which was initiated by the Austrian Health Insurance Fund (ÖGK) together with the province of Upper Austria and important stakeholders in the health sector. The focus of the barrier-free web platform is information about the right contact points in the health system and help for self-help. This is primarily with the aim of conveying the correct use of the health system in Austria to people who are not familiar with it. The information is available in many foreign languages and in simple language.

The platform also offers some useful information for health professionals in video format and as a downloadable manual - including information on how to communicate with patients.

What is the general situation regarding the training of health care staff? OÖ- Gesundheitsholding (OÖG), the largest hospital operator in Upper Austria with a market share of 53.5%, runs the Kepler University Hospital and five regional hospitals at eight locations. It refers to numerous offers: Training in non-verbal communication and special online training programmes on dementia for all staff members, a module on "Palliative Care for people with dementia and cognitive diseases" as part of the interprofessional basic palliative training course, inclusion of people with impairments as part of the special basic training for doctors and several relevant training contents as part of nursing training.

In addition, social counselling for people with disabilities is offered in all hospitals.

ÖGK also refers to special offers: For example, the dental health centre in Linz is geared towards the needs of people with disabilities. A mobile dental treatment team treats people in care and nursing homes as needed. At the ÖGK spa "Mein Tisserand" in Bad Ischl, the staff is trained in the basics of sign language and the technical infrastructure is adapted to the special needs of deaf people. And the ÖGK's "Help Network" offers case and care management from a single source: complex concerns are particularly frequently accompanied, where, for example, many administrative procedures are also carried out outside the ÖGK are necessary. The network is often used for insured persons with disabilities, informs a spokesperson for ÖGK.

Within the company, ÖGK, the largest health insurance company in Austria with around 7.5 million insured persons, completed the "My Ability" project in 2022: The goal of the project was to determine the current status of activities in the areas of diversity, disabilities, accessibility and inclusion: For example, the website www.oegk.at is barrier-free and easy-to-understand language has been established as a standard throughout the company, ÖGK informs. To this end, the health insurance fund has published the guideline "Well said!" for all employees. Important publications are checked for comprehensibility within the company.

Conclusion: There are initiatives to minimise or eliminate communication barriers in the health system. Websites of important contact points are often, but not always, designed to be barrier-free, and here and there information is also available in easy language. The needs of people with disabilities are also an issue in education and training.

In practice - as so often in life - it depends on who you are dealing with: Many doctors, nurses and therapists try to communicate with their patients at eye level. Caregivers in institutions know where people with disabilities can count on accommodation and often intervene in a supportive way. However, there is a lack of coordinated control, further development and systematic implementation.