

Many thanks for the invitation to speak here today. Welcome to the conference! I would like to thank everybody for making the effort to come here to the Netherlands to discuss issues relating to people with dual sensory impairment. I very much hope that this conference will promote further improvement in the communication between and with people with dual sensory impairment.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to tell you something about the situation in the Netherlands. My name is Hans Ouwerkerk and I am the chairman of the Netherlands Association for Care of the Disabled. This is the professional association for all institutions in the disabled sector. The Netherlands has a population of 16 million. Research has shown that 1.1. million people in the Netherlands have a physical, sensory or mental impairment. Over 100,000 of these receive daily care and support from our institutions. The member institutions which work specifically with people with sensory impairments are very interested in the experiences and ideas which will emerge from this conference and look forward to using them to further strengthen the professional care and support they give their clients.

There is a lot I could say about the Dutch system and the changes which have occurred in recent years. However, due to the constraints of time, I will restrict myself to talking about the importance of sharing knowledge and promoting cooperation in relation to the theme of professionalisation.

Professional care of the disabled must be based on providing what disabled people actually want. Today it is no longer the professional alone who determines what is good for someone: the emphasis has shifted from 'looking after' to 'looking for'. We have also come to recognise that the wishes and expectations of people with impairments are not radically different from those

of other people. Like anyone else, disabled people like to have their loved ones around them, they want to have their own place to live, they want to go to school, and they want to go to work. They want to live a life which suits their capabilities. Equal rights and equal opportunities. But it is not always easy to lead a normal life. Many disabled people are surrounded by carers: their parents, brothers, sisters, neighbours and friends. However when these carers find it difficult to meet their needs, this is when the professional services come into the picture.

The new approach I have described is the result of developments in science, society and changing ideas about caring for the disabled in the Netherlands.

In a scientific context, there have been major innovations in medicine, behavioural sciences and social sciences. There has been a huge increase in knowledge of the causes of functional disabilities and in intervention opportunities.

For a long time, knowledge about disabilities was fragmented over separate areas such as illnesses and health conditions, functional disabilities (for example, deafness, blindness, plasticity, epilepsy), individual skill impairments (for example impairments in reading, writing, general daily life, communication) and social aspects (integration and thus participation in society). The different disciplines worked parallel to each other with their own reference frameworks. This all changed in 1980 when the World Health Organisation presented a common language for the disciplines: the ICF, the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health. According to the ICF, the different aspects of functioning are:

- Illness and health conditions
- Functions (such as physiological and mental characteristics of the organism) and anatomical characteristics (parts or organs of the body)

- Activities (functioning or skills of the individual)
- Participation (participation in social life)
- External and personal context which also determine functioning.

In social terms, the concept of thinking and acting according to the principle of equality and human rights has been very influential. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights laid the basis for this in 1948. Care providers in the Netherlands consider the subsequent elaboration of this principle in the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities as the basis for their services. In the Netherlands, all care providers agree that these are the guidelines for their approach. An approach that increasingly aims at helping people with functional limitations achieve a good quality of life.

When we look at changes in the management of the disabled sector, the main change is the introduction of market forces and the fact that more money has become available for care in recent years. Both changes mean that clients in the Netherlands have more choice regarding who provides support and how this support is given.

These developments have resulted in the emergence of a more shared vision in the Netherlands about how disabled people function in society and how care providers can respond. Using this as a reference framework, the Dutch disabled sector is currently working towards further consolidating the knowledge base which also expressly focuses on a more specific target group policy.

Consolidating this knowledge base means that in professional care and support for the disabled, there is a need for more direction and promotion of scientific research, a stronger infrastructure aimed at research and professionalisation and the

promotion of more evidence and practice-based support for the disabled.

In that framework, the VGN stimulates a range of activities aimed at collecting knowledge, sharing knowledge and promoting cooperation. These include:

- Creating a virtual structure which stimulates knowledge exchange. This focuses primarily on the development of theme-based communities, (client) target groups or professionals and the express aim is to achieve a functionality within which knowledge is pooled.
- A specific professionalisation programme through master classes and further training.
- Promoting practice-oriented research by setting up a science prize.
- A magazine for the sector focusing on initiatives at institution level and reports on new developments.

The policy I have described recognises the diversity of target groups which receive care and support from our member institutions. Small target groups with special issues such as the deaf-blind need a very focused approach. In the Netherlands, this knowledge has been brought together in a small number of institutions which have developed specific expertise in this field. Visio, our host organisation of today, for example, has set up special toddler and pre-school groups and organises theme groups and meeting weeks for adults.

I hope that this conference will make an important contribution to further improving communication for people with acquired deaf-blindness. I also hope that professionals, institutions, clients and others will find each other here to work on new and creative solutions for existing problems of the target group.

I wish you an inspiring and enjoyable conference!

