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*How do the third year medical students of Medical University
in Lublin understand the term 'disability'?*

A phenomenon of physical, psychical and mental handicap has accompanied man from the dawn of history. Extreme attitudes towards the handicapped ranging from fear and hostility to affirmative attitudes within political correctness have been observed for ages. In 19th and 20th centuries people stopped to treat handicap as a purely medical phenomenon. Actions in aid of the handicapped evolved from passive forms of care in medical centres to well-known social integration of handicapped people and giving them equal opportunities of professional and personal development. At present, the social dimension of being handicapped, that is the possibility of full participation in social life, is treated equally with the medical or functional dimension. It has become quite popular to think that handicap cannot be defined as a limitation of a given individual in using rights or opportunities available to healthy people but as a lack of adjustment of society (among others, technical infrastructure) to giving the handicapped equal participation in life. In the past, in order to define physical handicap, there were two terms used. Disability (from the Turkish word 'kałyk' – a handicapped man) and invalidity (in 19th century an invalid was only a person with considerable physical disability caused by war or military service). The term 'handicap' has been used for about 20 years (2).

The United Nations in Standard Principles of Compensation for the Disabled say as follows: 'Handicap may be physical, intellectual or may result from disorders of senses; it may result from somatic or mental disease. The disorders, situations or diseases mentioned above may have a permanent or temporary character' (5). In 1980 World Health Organisation adopted International Classification of Injuries, Handicap and Disabilities.

According to the lower part of the Polish Parliament a handicapped person is a person whose physical, psychical or mental abilities limit or make everyday life, education, work and fulfilling social roles difficult or impossible, permanently or temporarily. At the same time it is emphasised that the handicapped have right to independent and active life and that they cannot be discriminated against.

A lot of attention been has also paid to the definition of handicap in the documents issued by the European Community Board. There is not one definition of handicap in EC countries. A few different definitions are quite often used only in one country. Each country of EC also has its own system of adjudication on handicap. Handicap is not still regarded only as a result of a disease or injury. First of all, it is the result of barriers that a handicapped person encounters in the society (8). In Polish legislation the criteria of adjudication on handicap and its levels are specified by a bill (7).

The aim of the work was to check medicine students' knowledge on the subject of handicap, integration with the handicapped and students' attitude towards them.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research was carried out by means of a personally prepared questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions including 6 open and 14 closed ones. 151 students of the third year of the Doctor's Department at Medical University of Lublin were included in the research. There were 101 women and 50 men at the age from 20 to 29.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Figures show how students understand the term 'handicap' with reference to people with sensor deficiencies (Fig.1), intellectual (Fig.2) and physical disability (Fig.3) Only 11.92% of the examined knew that the year 2003 is the European Year of the Handicapped but none of the examined could give any names of the integration events organized both in the region and in whole Poland. However, most of the examined students could give their own definition of the terms: 'integration' or 'support'. Moreover, 92.05% of students did not identify support with helping the disabled. What is worth mentioning is the fact that 50.3% of the examined do not encounter the disabled in their life, 11.6% feel embarrassed in contact with the disabled and 78.8% of students do not feel prepared for co-operation with the disabled in their future profession.

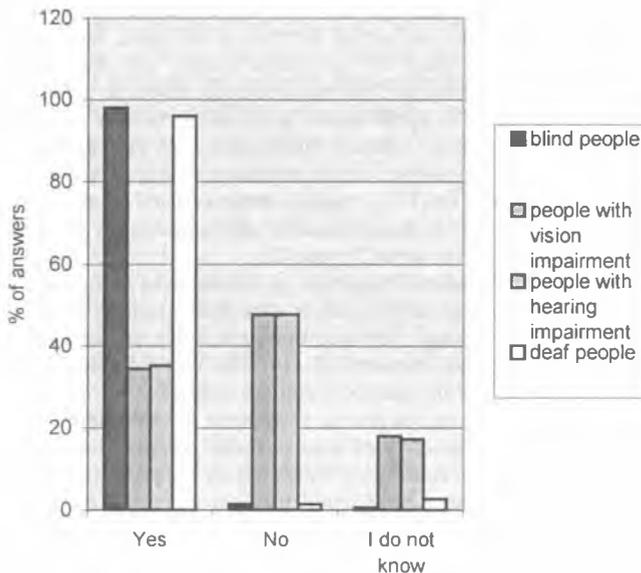


Fig.1. Understanding the term 'disability' among the interviewed students in reference to people with sensor disorders

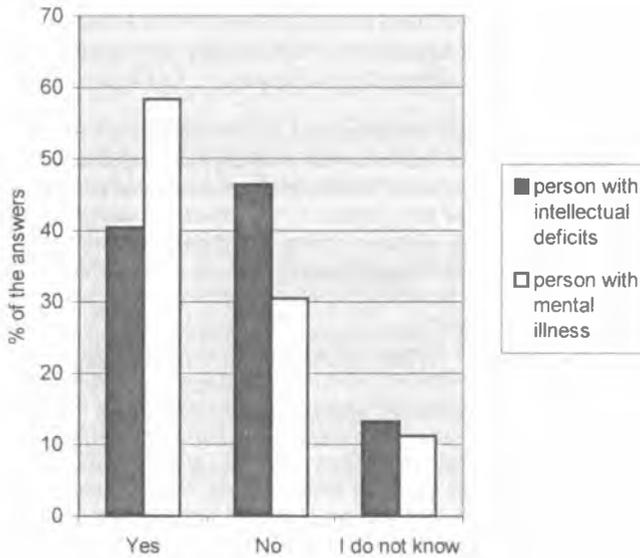


Fig.2. Understanding the term 'disability' among the interviewed students in reference to people with mental disorders

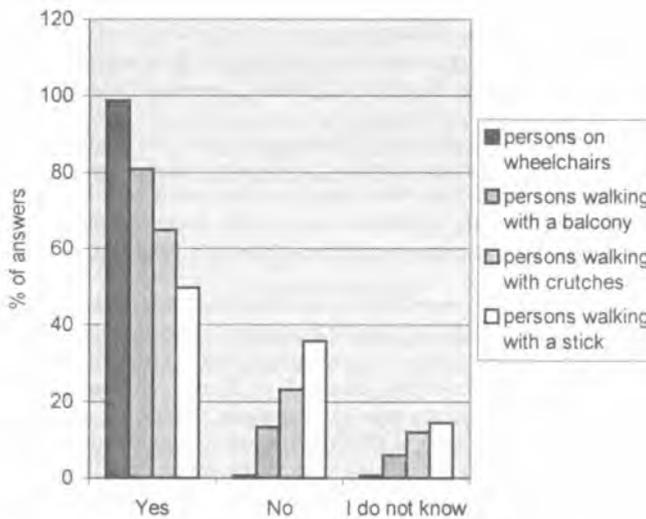


Fig.3. Understanding the term 'disability' by the interviewed students in reference to people with difficulties in walking and transition from place to place on their own

In EC countries the phenomenon of handicap affects 37 million people, which corresponds with 12% of the entire population of these countries (from 10% in France, Greece and Portugal to 15% in Spain). The differences between the individual countries result from the differences in adjudication (3). In Poland, the disabled people make up 17.47% of population at the age of over 15 (4).

In 2000 the European Commission presented an announcement 'Toward Europe without barriers for the disabled', in which they showed a strategy aiming at reduction of social and architectural barriers. These barriers make it difficult for the disabled people to participate fully in social life, to take advantage of their rights, to get education and work. The membership countries took actions in order to improve access to schools and offices as well as sports centres. This improvement included introduction of transport means which were adapted to the disabled people's needs, and reduction of architectural barriers as well as introduction of access to information and new technologies (8).

The tendencies of Polish and European Parliaments as well as the governments of other countries aim at 'mainstreaming', which is placing all issues connected with the disabled in the centre of attention. However, the level of knowledge on this subject of medicine students is surprisingly low. The level of adjustment of public utility buildings and houses to the people on wheelchairs is also far from the ideal. These facts cause still going on isolation of a considerable percentage of the disabled from the group of their fit peers. Some 'integration' schools do not solve the problem. Moreover, many schools make high health requirements for the candidates who want to attend these schools. That is why the students of medical academies really have no possibility of contact with the disabled people, especially in the early stage of studies when they attend preclinical courses.

In EC countries the disabled people have a lower level of education in comparison with the fit people. In France, Italy, Spain and Great Britain the percentage of the disabled people with primary education is high. The biggest percentage of the disabled who finish their studies is in France and Finland (8). The research by Styk (2001) showed that among the disabled who live in the country in the Lublin region 0.93% do not have any education at all, 42.7% have elementary education, 35.3% vocational education, 18.6% secondary education and only 0.75% higher education. Only 6.2% of this group work professionally (6). In EC countries 35–45% of the disabled people at the age of professional activity make up 6–8% of the entire population at the age of 15–64. The index of unemployment in the group of the disabled in EC makes up 11% (6% among the fit). There are more disabled men (36%) than women (25%) who are employed (3).

The mutual contacts of the disabled leave also a lot to be desired. Only 38% of the disabled living in the country declare friendship with other disabled people (6). Many of the disabled stay at home and build their own image of the world on the basis of information obtained from the media. The lofty legislation acts, which guarantee the disabled equal rights and participation in social life on equal conditions with the fit citizens have little in common with practice.

The EC Board announced the year 2003 as the European Year of the Disabled. Its aims are to increase the awareness of the disabled people's rights to protection discrimination as well as the full and equal use of their rights, to encourage introduction of solutions needed for promotion of equal opportunities for the disabled in Europe, to promote the exchange of experiences on this subject between the local communities, to prompt versatile co-operation, to improve the communication in the case of the disabled and to improve their image to mould the awareness of the differences among the disabled and the forms of discrimination to increase social awareness about versatile discrimination which the disabled encounter and to promote the idea of equal access of the disabled children and youth to education (8). The fact is worrying that most of the examined medicine students know little about the European Year of the Disabled although there is much information about it on television and in the press and the logo of this event is frequently presented in the media.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The analysis of the results of the research carried out among medicine students show the low level of their knowledge about handicap integration with the physically, psychically and sensorically disabled.

2. There is a great need to educate young prospective doctors not only to treat and cure but also how to live with them, to support, to educate and activate the disabled.

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SUMMARY

Disabilities have existed since the beginning of human race. There are many definitions of the term. The aim of the work was to check the knowledge of medical students about disabilities. The study was conducted with the use of a questionnaire. 151 third year medical students were interviewed. The majority of the students judged blind and deaf people as disabled, fewer – people with partial deafness and dimness of vision, even fewer – the handicapped and mentally diseased ones. The majority called people on wheelchairs disabled. Only 11.92% know that the European Year of People Living with Disabilities is held in 2003. Medical students represent poor knowledge about disabilities and they need education in the field.

Jak studenci III roku Wydziału Lekarskiego Akademii Medycznej w Lublinie rozumieją pojęcie „niepełnosprawność”?

Zjawisko niepełnosprawności towarzyszy człowiekowi od zarania dziejów. Mimo to funkcjonuje wiele definicji tego pojęcia. Celem pracy było sprawdzenie wiadomości studentów medycyny na temat osób z niepełnosprawnością. Badanie przeprowadzono z użyciem ankiety, objęto nim 151 studentów Akademii Medycznej. Większość studentów identyfikowała osoby niewidome i niesłyszące jako niepełnosprawne; mniej – niedosłyszące i niedowidzące, jeszcze mniej osoby z niedoborami intelektualnymi i chorobami psychicznymi. Większość ankietowanych uznała osoby poruszające się na wózkach inwalidzkich za niepełnosprawne. Jedynie 11.92% badanych wiedziało, że w roku 2003 obchodzony jest Europejski Rok Osób z Niepełnosprawnością. Niski poziom wiedzy na temat niepełnosprawności wśród studentów medycyny wskazuje na potrzebę kształcenia młodych adeptów sztuki lekarskiej w tym kierunku.