

# The present situation of rehabilitation work with respect to physiotherapy

Lone Tived, Physiotherapist\*

IRCT  
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Physiotherapy has to a large extent lived up to the principle of improving the understanding of the treatment of torture survivors, especially since the adoption of the guidelines for physiotherapists by the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT) in 1991, and their approval at the 12th International Congress of the WCPT in Washington in 1995. According to these guidelines, knowledge about torture and its sequelae must be an integral part of the curriculum for the training of physiotherapists – a statement unique to this profession.

## Understanding the survivor is important

In Denmark, the Rehabilitation and Research Centre for Torture Victims (RCT) has focused on the training and rehabilitation of torture survivors for several years, and has thus acquired much experience in treatment methods and programmes.

The feeling of being afraid of involvement in unfamiliar matters is known to all of us. We tend to leave them to others. But this is difficult when dealing with torture and its sequelae. As a physiotherapist, therefore, it has been a great pleasure to see how physiotherapy has gradually come to play a larger part in the treatment of torture survivors globally. We have learnt that physiotherapy can help in the treatment of muscular tension, pain due to overstretched tendons and joints, and damages in connective tissue that has been exposed to bleeding and beating. In this connection, the Association of Danish Physiotherapists has taken part in the publication, for the training of physiotherapists, of an English language book about the treatment of torture victims by physiotherapy.<sup>1</sup> The book describes the sequelae of the various forms of torture, and points out that if one recognizes the sequelae, then one can decide on the correct treatment. It is important for physiotherapists to know that all forms of treatment can be used if only attention is paid to the fact that one is dealing with a torture victim. If the therapist does not have knowledge, insight, and understanding of the situation of the survivor, the treatment may well result in the opposite effect, and be felt by the client as a violation.

## Workshop in the Middle East

Apart from the publication of teaching material, Denmark has also been the prime mover in arranging several workshops on the treatment of torture survivors with physiotherapy. During a visit to the Gaza Community Mental Health

Programme in November 1998, I arranged a joint workshop on the role of the physiotherapist in the treatment of torture survivors. What was special about this workshop was that RCT had for a long time wanted to have a workshop in this particular region because we have many clients from Palestine. As is well known, Gaza and the West Bank have suffered 25 years of Israeli occupation. This period has had serious human costs in the form of deaths, imprisonments, and torture. Nevertheless, it was a revelation for some of the participants that many were suffering both psychological and physical sequelae even a long time after the torture, and that many of these sequelae cannot be cured by the means we know today. The workshop stressed yet again how important it is for as many people as possible to know about the treatment of torture survivors. As in all previous workshops in which I have taken part, the participants were extremely happy about the teaching material we had with us, including some material translated into Arabic. The workshops provide an opportunity for distributing professional material to, and making contact with, members of one's own and other professional groups.

## Taking care of the therapists

Everyone is deeply touched by hearing about the wickedness of torture. The victims' stories and experiences are often so terrible and traumatic that they are difficult to cope with, even for a therapist. If the therapist cannot work through these traumatic accounts, the result may be a feeling of being burnt out, of powerlessness. Physiotherapists come into direct contact with the clients' pain, and at the same time they learn about the causes of the pain. This makes the physiotherapists a particularly exposed group among the various health professionals who treat torture survivors. We therefore have to focus not only on the understanding of the sequelae of torture, but also on the well-being of the therapists. A recognition of the fact that one can have gone through *enough* and be *too* affected by what one has heard during the consultations is important for the physiotherapists to be able



PHOTO: BENT BALSBY

The author demonstrating treatment techniques.

\*  
RCT  
Borgergade 13  
P.O. Box 2107  
1014 Copenhagen K  
Denmark

**Burn-out**

It is important to know the symptoms of burn-out, and to know how to avoid them or treat them.

*Symptoms of burn-out*

- Intrusive memories of past experiences
- Intrusive thoughts and fantasies connected with their patients' stories
- Nightmares
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Melancholy
- Tiredness
- Forgetfulness
- Isolation
- Reluctance to meeting the patients again

*Prevention of burn-out*

- Seek supervision in difficult cases
- Avoid too much work
- Say "no" in time
- Share your experiences with other therapists
- Keep up-to-date with your profession
- Have a routine when you get home from work, such as taking a bath or changing your clothes as a sign that you are free
- Reserve time for hobbies and entertainment
- Spend some time with families and friends

to maintain an engagement in and a professional attitude to their work. Considerations about how physiotherapists best can take care of each other, and advice about how to cope with the problems "outside working hours", have therefore become an integrated part of our workshops today. It is important to avoid symptoms of burn-outs, since, in the worst case, the result may be that we as therapists do more harm than good.

The great interest taken in my visit to Gaza has led to a follow-up workshop in the autumn of 1999. At the WCPT's 13th International Congress in Japan in May 1999, torture is included both in lectures and poster presentations, in collaboration with the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT). The initiatives taken at – and the relative increase in – conferences and workshops, and translation of teaching material, show that physiotherapists have acknowledged the importance of giving torture survivors competent treatment.

*References*

1. Prip K, Tived L, Holten N. *Physiotherapy for torture survivors – a basic introduction*. Copenhagen: International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims, 1995.

This article was written in cooperation with Christina Hennings, Information Assistant at IRCT. □

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## WCPT Resolution in support of victims of torture

*Passed at the 13th International Congress of WCPT, held in Japan in May 1999, proposed by the Association of Danish Physiotherapists*

**Motion**

The World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT) wishes to express its support to commemorate the United Nations' Day in Support of Victims of Torture on June 26 of each year.

**Rationale**

Torture is one of the root obstacles to democracy and human well being and through our support to this day, we want to express the wish of physiotherapists for total eradication of torture.

The WCPT has in cooperation with the IRCT (International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims) through the last year established seminars for physiotherapists involved in education of physiotherapy students in order to fulfil our WCPT Guidelines concerning Torture. Our point 7

here mentions that education regarding prevention and prohibition of torture as well as the assessment and treatment of torture victims should be included with physiotherapy education programmes.

We want this international UN day to create awareness to torture and to honour the victims and survivors of torture and their families, friends, and supporters. We support the expression of the IRCT, that "Democracy cannot be built with the hands of broken souls". We will join the initiatives to create awareness to this cruel and degrading behaviour and to recognise the men and women who have struggled for a better world and who have suffered or disappeared.

WCPT encourage that physiotherapists throughout the world support the fight against torture on this United Nations' International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. □

# TORTURE



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