

DEAF AND HEARING IMPAIRED CHILDREN EUROPE 2005
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STOKE, C.H.

I would like to offer a warm welcome to every one of you to this vitally important Conference.

Deafness in children is not a glamorous subject. Other more dramatic disabilities capture the headlines and the attention of people. And as a result the devastating effects of deafness in children are little understood by the public and often disregarded.

Your jobs as professionals dedicated to the children are thus all the harder. And the children suffer the consequences which distort their lives, limit their achievements and undermine their happiness.

So, perhaps, after improving audiological services and utilising modern technology, the first priority is to try to ensure childhood deafness is always on the agenda and in the public consciousness.

I think the best way to influence Governments and make major progress is to use the voluntary organisations and to contact politicians directly.

In Britain we have some fine organisations. In addition to RNID and BDA, we have the splendid NDCS which, as its name indicates, specialises in childhood deafness.

In terms of influencing the Government and making laws we want, in addition to the organisations I've mentioned, we have some very formidable political organisations such as the APDG and the AP Group on Deafness.

As a result, we now have some extremely important Acts of Parliament to help disabled people, some of which became law a few weeks ago. I mean the Disability Discrimination Act which outlaws discrimination against disabled people – including the deaf – over a very wide field.

In Britain, disability is now firm and prominent on the Agenda. So much so that recent legislation imposes a duty on the whole public sector to promote disability equality.

We still have some considerable way to go, but with these powerful organisations and laws we are in a good position to fight for deaf children in our society.

I hope that the exchange of this kind of information as all twenty countries make their contributions will enable the conference to become an important and possibly historic springboard for action.

The stakes are very high, and I am optimistic about the outcome of this Conference. I hope that in the course of your presentations and discussions, you will be able to identify the problems, examine the best means of tackling them, draw up a course of international action and keep in close and continuous touch with each other to monitor progress.

The countries that are represented here have a vast accumulation of highly professional expertise. Progress often occurs in one area but so often simply results in patchwork provision unless it percolates throughout the whole of Europe, taking account of the individual characteristics of each area. The more we can discuss problems and exchange ideas, the sooner we shall have better standards all round.

In the last fifty years the countries of Europe have suffered kaleidoscopic changes and upheavals and these will have damaged developments for deaf children but if, from this complex period of change, we can extract initiatives designed to help, the Forum can have a very significant effect on the future.

I wish you well in your deliberations and I hope that, in addition to the hard work involved, you will find your attendance here an enjoyable and rewarding experience.