**LOW VISION Services, a Global Right**

**Setting the Standards in Europe**

**EBU Low Vision Conference**

**14-17 June 2018, Laško, Slovenia**

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**Opening address by Ministry of Health of the Republic of Slovenia**

**Dear representatives of the European Blind Union, esteemed experts and other conference attendees,**

on behalf of the Ministry of Health, I sincerely welcome you to the **EBU Low Vision Conference,** which will discuss services for people with severe visual impairment, and where experience regarding standards and rights in Europe and everyday practices will be exchanged.

According to official estimates, 30 million blind and partially sighted people live in Europe and this number is rising with population ageing, which makes this conference exceptionally important.

Some people may be born with partial sight, while others lose their sight in accidents or due to diseases, such as diabetes or arthritis.

Many people who are losing their sight simply adapt to the situation gradually and are too frequently unaware of the seriousness of their problems. The elderly usually lose visual acuity because of macular degeneration or the loss of lens opacity. It has been estimated that the number of partially sighted people in Slovenia exceeds 10,000 people, which is a heterogeneous population with various needs.

The partially sighted are frequently unnoticed, since they do not initially use a white cane. They may cycle along a route which they know in detail, but can be completely helpless in a new, unknown space.

Our task is to inform expert workers and society about the issue of blindness and partial sightedness, and also professionals in health care. A physician’s assessment of a visually impaired person’s capacity to work, for example, may be different if the physician is familiar with the advantages provided to the visually impaired by modern technology. We can set an even better example if we employ a partially sighted or blind person. The Ministry of Health has done this several times, and has also adjusted working conditions to the partially sighted and the blind.

It is essential that the activities of various state, local and non-governmental policies are combined in all fields. We are obliged to do this by the adopted Action Programme for Persons with Disabilities 2014–2021, which combines activities in health care, education, social matters and other fields important for an individual’s life.

In addition to the above Programme, the lives of the disabled in Slovenia are mentioned in over 70 acts, and somewhat fewer refer to the blind. Certain acts also ensure concrete rights for visually impaired persons, such as the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities Act, which enables the equal participation of visually impaired persons in all procedures taking place at state and other public service providers.

**The most important achievement** in health care in this Government’s term was the opening of the National Centre for Comprehensive Rehabilitation of the Blind and the Visually Impaired, for which the Department of Ophthalmology and the Union of Associations of Blind and Visually Impaired Persons of Slovenia have been actively striving for many years, and I publicly thank them for their efforts on this occasion.

**The Ministry of Health** initially provided funds for the pilot project, and it later ensured systemic arrangement and its operations through regulated procedures. The Centre’s objective is to enable individuals and their families to receive comprehensive multidisciplinary treatment in order to live as independently as possible. The treatment involves various experts, e.g. ophthalmologist, nurse, typhlo-pedagogue, psychologist, social worker etc. It provides services for children, adolescents and adults, which are implemented at the National Centre and in the home environment.

According to the Department of Ophthalmology, the Centre operates well professionally and commendably, but what is most important, the rehabilitees are pleased and grateful for this right to which they are entitled from compulsory health insurance. The providers additionally cooperate with national and municipal institutions, centres and associations, which could further contribute to improving the programme.

**In the future,** our efforts must be directed towards expanding rights also regarding technical aids, since we know that the functioning of visually impaired persons would be facilitated greatly if they were entitled to a stationary electronic magnifier. Within prevention programmes taking place in health care, it would be necessary to design programmes to raise awareness about partial sightedness and blindness.

**Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,**

the personal approach of key individuals is what lends already good deeds special weight. Each and every one of us, and all of us together, contribute to a happier life and well-being, and we all take responsibility for it. Each in our own way.

**It is you, the attendees of this conference,** who, with your knowledge and experience, determine the vision and guidelines of future activities in the field of low vision.

In conclusion, I wish to thank you for your work, and I wish you all a pleasant stay in Slovenia.



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