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## **INTERNATIONAL CLASSIFICATION OF FUNCTIONING (ICF) AND PARENT'S EDUCATION METHODOLOGY**

### **From diagnostic to functional approach**

*There must be synthesis between  
the scientific bases of diagnosis and therapies  
and the care of the person*  
O. Sacks

One of the main actions of the Parents' Education Methodology is the collection and publication of accounts of the educational itineraries that families make with their children. The Methodology was first created by parents with children with a disability, those who, more than the others, become aware of their role as parents and support the capacity and human integrity of their offspring. A difficult situation emerges from their stories: the first time in which experts describe the problems of their child. It is the moment of Diagnosis in which it is necessary to specify what is wrong to start rehabilitation.

The International Classification of Diseases and Handicap (ICDH) is the instrument created by the World Health Organization to classify diseases and establish a common language in the world. It has synchronic features: the pathology or disability is specified and communicated here and now to the people concerned. The communication of a diagnosis is a difficult situation for those who receive it but also for the one who makes it: *being a doctor, I often had to communicate very painful things. I hate it, I hate to say: "You have a multiple sclerosis, you have the disease of Duchenne. But I cannot simply say these terrible words, my task is to add "You have diagnosed with it, but it is not the end of your life...". Most of the times, the loss of normal conditions is a loss and that's it. A condition that makes you unhappy, that makes you collapse. Our task as doctors is to remove the "that's it" (Minerva 2004).*

Since 2001, doctors have one more instrument at their disposal. Through the International Classification of Functioning (ICF), the WHO, which has a comprehensive look on the world and on the various cultures that compose it, has begun a deep reform in the sector of medical professionalism whose essence is grasped in the words written by Oliver Sacks: "looking for a synthesis between the scientific bases of diagnosis and therapies and the care of the person".

### **Expanding one's vision: cooperation with other professionals**

The ICF is a functional tool to locate health professionals in space and time in a new vision of disease and disability. The person is not seen as a passive individual, but in his personality and culture; he is not taken into consideration only in his decontextualised specificity, but he is structured in a network of links and connections through which he keeps in touch with life and that constitutes a relational and cultural environment. One's life does not include only illness or disability, it also include health and a drive toward normality. From the "here and now", the vision expands to a life project over time.

This approach becomes an official classification and is widespread in the world, thanks to the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health. The key message of the ICF is that: *Beyond the disease, health policies need a real measure of health* in connection with the Alma Ata Declaration that does not define health as absence of disease but as a state of psychophysical well-being. The identified domains are body Functions and Structures, Activities, and Participation viewed as part of one's well-being.

### **ICF, Positivity and Compensation**

The keyword that identifies the ICF is Functioning. The attention of the health professional is redirected from disease to health, from pathological to normal functioning. There are diseases or situations of disability but they should be included in a broader context, the life of the person that has been and will be an active life.



The same terms articulate and specify Functioning in the ICF: *Body functions and structures, Activities and Participation* "broaden the perspective of classification by allowing the description of positive elements, as it is stressed in the Introduction in the official text of the ICF (WHO 2002). Etymologically, the word functioning derives from the Latin verb *fungor*, meaning to drive you to the end, that suggests the idea of development over time, but also *fruor*, meaning to sprout, to prosper (Semerano 2000).

It is a new culture of health and positivity that allows a new approach to disease and disability stressed by the research of scholars like Oliver Sacks and Lev Semenovic Vygotskij. In *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven paradoxical stories*, the neurologist Sacks observes that *Deficit, diseases and disorders can lead to light resources that in their absence could not be observed nor imagined* (Sacks 1998). At the basis of these considerations, there is the concept of Compensation developed by Vygotskij: *If, while growing up, a deaf or blind child reaches the same level of a normal child, it means that children with deficits reach the same level in another way, through another path, by other means and it is particularly important for the educator to know the special path along which he must lead the child. The key to these particular features is given by the law of the transformation from lack represented by deficit to surplus represented by compensation* (Vygotskij 1986)

### **Broadening one's horizons, connecting different professionals**

In the moment in which the WHO decides to propose the ICF, as the official presentation indicates, it triggers: *a real revolution in the conceptualization of the health action that, for the first time, takes into account the contextual and environmental factors.*

Through its supranational organization, Health indicates that the correct approach is to present the person in his completeness and functionality, not only in mathematical terms, stressing what lacks or is wrong. The disease detection remains fundamental: it is functional to rehabilitation, but, through the ICF, the new approach takes control of the space and time in which the individual lives.

Attention is focused on the ecology of the environment and of the human being. They are spaces that medicine needs to know through their main characters, through those who are experts in the contextual and environmental sector, because it is where they live. It must collaborate, accept knowledge additional to its own, integrate it, recognizing that the human being lives in a community that has a story and a future.

It underlines the need to recognize other capabilities that are not those strictly related to health care, as instead the ICDH required. In addition to body structures and their functioning, mainly on a medical level, the classification opens the door *to activity as the carrying out of a task or action and to participation as involvement in a life situation.*

### **From dis-ability to abilities**

The ICF is changing the way we see disability, which is not considered in itself, as the problem of a minority, but as an experience that everyone can live in the course of life, because of an accident or an illness.

The approach is positive, starting from the capability: we are not only concerned with what people "cannot do", but also with what they "can do". For example Stephen Hawking is experiencing a situation of handicap affecting his communication and mobility, but this does not alter the fact that he is the best astrophysicist of our time.

In the direction of de-medicalization, one of the most significant aspects of the ICF consists in taking into account aspects of disability which depend on a social organization that takes account of *normality*<sup>1</sup> rather than taking account of the variety of beings and of their forms. Disability is not considered as a dysfunction in medical or biological terms, the ICF reports the impact of physical and human environment on the functioning of the person.

One of the ICF purposes is a neutral approach that is functional to integration: disability is not considered in itself as something specific to point at and isolate, but as a result of different health conditions that permanently or temporarily may affect everyone of us.

<sup>1</sup> From an etymological point of view, normal derives from the Latin word *norma*, the instrument by which the Roman surveyors delimited fields, in order to divide the land in centurions. *Normal* means *limited*.

### **Bibliography**

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