

BOTSWANA

Rehabilitation gives people with spinal cord injuries a new lease on life

Less than two years ago, military police officer Edward Dhliwayo rolled his car and incurred a spinal cord injury that has permanently paralysed him from the waist down. As a result of Swedish-Botswanian cooperation, a clinic is now in place for the rehabilitation of injuries like Eddie's. Today, he coaches others in the same situation.

“Care for those with spinal cord injuries barely existed before the project began. Patients were treated in standard orthopaedic wards and were only operated on in cases where rehabilitation was considered feasible. If you had a neck injury, for example, you wouldn’t have received rehab,” says Inka Löfvenmark, who is a physiotherapist at the Spinalis Foundation.

Following his accident on 1 January 2011, Edward Dhliwayo, or Eddie as he is known, ended up at the then recently opened Spinalis Clinic for spinal cord injuries at the Princess Marina Hospital in Gaborone. Initially, the clinic had only six beds. But it later developed to become a whole ward and it was there

Eddie was moved in June of the same year.

The new ward is a direct result of the partnership between the Swedish Spinalis Foundation and the Ministry of Health in Botswana through the Princess Marina Hospital in the capital, Gaborone.

Eddie Dhliwayo tells how the initial months were hectic and emotional.

“You have to afford yourself this time to mourn the two important functions lost through a spinal cord injury: your mobility and your independence. In coping with the psychological difficulties during rehabilitation and regaining as much mobility and independence as possible, motivation is a key factor,” he explains.



“I make a difference for other patients because they see me. Others start to think – if he can do it, why not me?” says Edward Dhliwayo, rehab coach at the Spinalis Clinic in Gaborone.

Young Eddie Dhliwayo clearly has a positive attitude. He relates how this has helped him find the motivation to get better. After a while, he felt he had been given a second chance – he had actually survived and could get better.

Today, he is one of the first to have been fully rehabilitated within the project. In addition, Eddie Dhliwayo has been seconded from the military to work at the clinic as a rehab coach. The concept is typical of the Spinalis clinic in Stockholm – patients must find their own motivation to create the conditions for an independent life. By seeing others who have been rehabilitated, patients also find good role models who inspire them.

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The next stage in the rehabilitation is to confront the considerable challenges involved in returning home. Eddie explains that when you come home, everything is new, both in the home itself as well as in the surrounding city. It is extremely difficult to get about by wheelchair in Gaborone and Dhliwayo would like the Botswana government to start working on adaptations for people with functional disabilities.

Since the project began, there have been signs that attitudes are changing and interest in issues related to functional disabilities has increased in the Botswana government. Last autumn, a delegation came to Sweden to see how the policy-making process works here.



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PHOTO: CARL MYRÉN

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/INKA LÖFVENMARK

At the Princess Marina Hospital, the clinic has now gained a clear home in new premises of its own and is operated entirely with funding from the hospital. A wheelchair workshop has been established and wheelchairs are bought in from Sweden and South Africa.

“I now see my patients using wheelchairs. They zip along the corridors at full speed and are bursting with energy,” says Dr Yashpal Gureja, head of the orthopaedic clinic at the Princess Marina Hospital in Gaborone. Over these years, the Spinalis Foundation has had the opportunity to develop the concept behind Spinalis, first in Botswana and, since the start of 2013, also in neighbouring Namibia. Funding by Sida will end in December 2013 but the partnership will continue. The hope is to be able to spread the concept to other countries in Africa.

THE FACTS

PARTNERS

Botswana Ministry of Health, Princess Marina Hospital and the Spinalis Foundation in Sweden.

COST

63,900,000 SEK

SIDA CONTRIBUTION

12,070,400 SEK

PARTNER CONTRIBUTION

51,800,000 SEK

TIMEFRAME

2009–2013

RESULTS

- A permanent ward for the rehabilitation of patients with spinal cord injuries has been established at the Princess Marina Hospital in Gaborone.
- Since the start in 2010 over 150 patients have been admitted for rehabilitation after a spinal cord injury.
- The centre’s out-patient clinic has, in the same period, performed over 850 medical interventions.
- A delivery chain for technical aids (wheelchairs, for example) has been established.
- The government of Botswana has begun to take a holistic approach to how the country should improve conditions for people with disabilities.
- Since January 2013, the concept is also being developed in Namibia.