

2012 Exchange Halifax / IOA-Congress Toronto

Next year has been 30 years that I finished my orthoptic-training in Switzerland. The first years of working as an orthoptist in an eye-practice as most of our orthoptists in Germany do, I was trying to get as much experience as possible.

In 1991, 7 years later, the International Congress of the IOA took place in Nurnberg, Germany. For a young orthoptist it was very expensive to attend the whole congress, but it was worth it.

Taking part in the workshops was of great benefit for me. Talking to the speaker, asking questions and discussing with other orthoptists from around the world was very inspiring.

After one of the workshops I spoke one of the speakers to ask some questions with practical relevant. He was very interested in my work and we had a good conversation. Two weeks later he sent me his video of the workshop of his diagnostic and an invitation to visit his clinic.

I was a bit sad, that I couldn't go for the visit immediately. I was happily pregnant with my daughter. I kept the idea in mind to do something like that later!

Last year I was lucky to get the chance to see how other orthoptists are working.



The IOA congress in Toronto! After applying for an exchange, I got this very kind invitation from Karen Mc Main to visit her and her team at the orthoptic clinic of the IWK Health Centre Eye Care Clinic at Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

3 years ago I made a trip through Nova Scotia with my family. Among other destinations we also went to Halifax, a very nice town close to the Atlantic.

In June 2012 I followed the invitation to observe the training and work at the orthoptic clinic in Halifax.

I had a great time over there. I was very impressed about their training and the really nice working atmosphere at the orthoptic-clinic.

It was especially interesting for me to observe the students training in Halifax, because we are just starting to get a university-training for orthoptists in Germany.

We have special orthoptic-training-schools at several University Hospitals. It takes us 3 years to finish our training and we do practical work in the orthoptic clinic from the beginning on.

The first day, I was kindly picked up by Karen, to find the right way into the orthoptic department.

First I was introduced to the whole staff, meet the students, orthoptists and doctors.

I was free to accompanying all the orthoptists and students while they are working.

The second year students were already preparing for their exams at the end of the week in Toronto. I was invited to follow them while Karen was "grilling" them in the different skills and parts for the upcoming examination.

It was also impressive to see and hear how much theoretical knowledge the first year students acquired, after only half a year of studying at the Dalhousie University. When I observed them, they were just starting their practical work under supervision of the teaching orthoptists. I think it is very

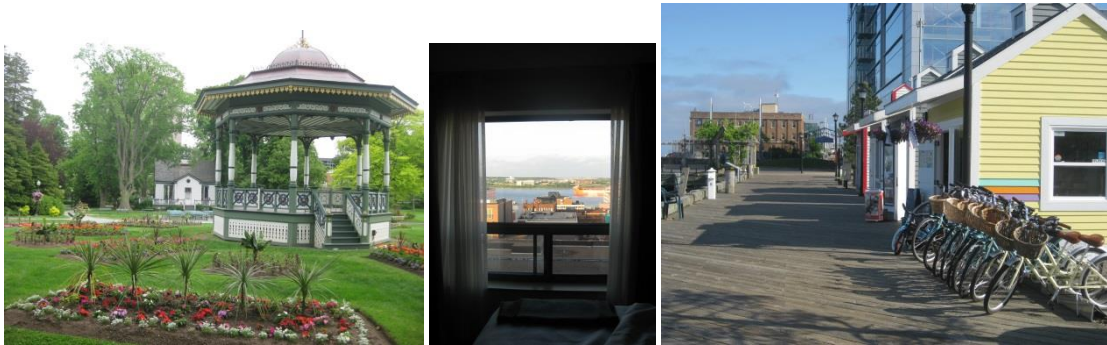
helpful that they had the opportunity to examine the child on their own, after an introduction to the file of the patient and discussing the diagnostics. They have 10 to 15 Min to do their tests and afterwards the orthoptist will double-check and finish the examination. This is a very good way to learn how to deal with parents and kids.

All patients from all over Nova Scotia come to the orthoptic clinic in Halifax, to get an amblyopia-check, a strabismus-diagnosis, treatment or operation. They sometimes had a long way to drive, up to 8 hrs, when they come from another island or far away.

There was a great variety of patients, so I could see all the different diagnoses and treatments. It was interesting for me, because we discussed how to deal with amblyopia and strabismus.

It was also interesting to discuss the system of education and studying in Canada, the health system compared to Germany and the standing and the salary of our profession in both countries. In-between we discussed the problems of the EU-Economy as well. It was interesting to get an impression of what Canadians think about it.

This week was a really nice experience indeed. I was joining the team in the clinic from 8 to 5. Afterwards I had this nice walk through nice gardens to my apartment with a nice view into the harbor, relaxing on the roof-terrace or taking a bicycle tour or walking the boardwalk at the seaside.



So what I learned this week was:

That they do many things like we do, but they don't hesitate to do early operation.

The Canadian orthoptists have a very good and efficient training system, very close to the practical aspects.

That they are under the influence of the US, because they are using TVs while testing to trigger the children to fixate in far distances! They need the prism-cover-test very early for the operation.

That they are very happy to have paediatric ophthalmologists to work with! They love to examine children, they are used to it, they know all the characters on television and they can be very funny!

That the Canadian orthoptists as well as many Canadian people I already met, are very open minded, very friendly and tolerant (I am not sure if I found the right words, but they are great, if you understand what I mean) as colleagues and working team.

My take home message from Halifax was:

Every time I was visiting Halifax, the sun was shining and it was 25°C, unbelievable for NS, Canada!

I am doing well as an orthoptist, but if I were standing at the beginning of my career I would try to go to Canada for a while!

It is inspiring to see how People other Countries are working. Take some ideas back home (not using the TV to force fixation, but the Frisby-Test," Fix and Follow" and the idea of the journal club).

Now, after this week, speaking English the whole time, sometimes already dreaming in English, I was prepared for the congress in Toronto!

The congress was a great opportunity to meet orthoptist from around the world and hear how they are dealing with all the orthoptic problems.

I had a great time in Canada. I am deeply grateful for this experience and much oblige to all the people who supported me that time, especially Karen, who hosted me so kindly.



Karen and her team on the boat trip, last evening IOA-Congress Toronto

Elke van Alen, Orthoptist
Hamburg, Germany
evanalen@yahoo.de