

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to be here today to welcome you to the 9th COTEC Congress of Occupational Therapy.

It is wonderful to see abstracts from 46 countries – at a European conference! The global interest in this event just goes to show the importance of occupational theory in the 21st century.

As you may know, two days ago Princess Estelle of Sweden was christened here in Stockholm. But for me, the name Estelle also has another significance.

Countess Estelle Bernadotte was an American lady who married Count Folke Bernadotte. In the 1940s, Estelle noted that occupational therapy was an established academic discipline, both in the United States and the United Kingdom. In Sweden, however, the occupation was hardly known.

- How could such a modern country as Sweden not have realised the importance of occupational therapists in society?

She began working to establish occupational therapy as a discipline in Sweden, and in 1949 when the first organised courses for occupational therapists were introduced in Sweden this was, in many ways, thanks to Countess Estelle.

Since then things have changed. Although Sweden is a small country, we are lucky to have one of the highest proportions of occupational therapists per capita in the world. About one third of our 10 000 occupational therapists work with the elderly.

This year the EU has decided to raise awareness of the contributions that older people make to society. The “2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations” is a highly relevant topic in a continent with an increasingly ageing population. Active ageing is about getting more out of life as you grow older. At work, at home and in society in general.

A meaningful life cannot only be provided by medical prescriptions and more years to live. A meaningful life must be seen from the perspective of each individual’s unique needs combined with each individual’s opportunities for participation and activity – this is a prerequisite for life.

Viewing society through the eyes of an occupational therapist provides us with invaluable knowledge. Society is not constructed according to the special needs of each individual – it is constructed according

to a model – a model that relies on a specific view of ability. Through the eyes of the occupational therapist we can see beyond that construction.

When Eva found out that she was suffering from a rheumatic illness it turned her life upside down. Let me quote:

”I thought my everyday life was going to fall apart. In the chaos that arose, my meeting with the occupational therapist turned out to be an important anchor and a condition for me being able to continue with my treatment. In my meetings with the occupational therapist, I found out how to make my everyday life work, what I perceived as problems and what tasks I wished to accomplish. We examined my need for various aids. With good medical treatment and the help of the occupational therapist I have been able to work full-time and to have a functioning social life.”

Honoured guests, with your expertise you can help individuals at all stages of life, from childhood to old age. With your assistance longer employment, greater participation in society and more independent living becomes a possibility. As the example of Eva illustrates, the importance of occupational therapists, not only for the individual, but also for families cannot be underestimated. Proper rehabilitation is an investment for society.

In order to face the challenges of the future, we need to invest and spread the knowledge of today. Therefore conferences like this, where the latest research is exchanged, are important – not only here and now – but in particular for future generations.

Simon and Garfunkel are among my favourite musical artists. And, in many ways, the occupational therapist is like a bridge over troubled water. From the small to the complex, the occupational therapist helps the individual to fulfill him- or herself. Simon and Garfunkel sing: Sail on Silver Girl, Sail on by. That is what occupational therapists do. They put the wind in our sails, they help us to sail on in life.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have come to Stockholm when it is at its best. After a long winter, summer is approaching, bringing with it light and hope. I hope the next few days will provide you with a chance to increase your knowledge and exchange ideas with each other. Even though you share a professional expertise, I am sure your countries sometimes have different approaches to the potential of the occupational therapist. We have much to learn from each other.

Thank you.