

# Health without barriers

## Health information in sign language for deaf people in Vienna

Around 4.000 deaf people living in Vienna do not have full barrier-free access to the health system. Lipreading is very exhausting and written language can't be fully understood, as well. This is because **sign language** is deaf people's mother tongue and German their first foreign language. For a person, that is born deaf, it is very difficult to learn spoken and written language as he or she can't hear how words are pronounced. Though this leads to various barriers and handicaps, deaf people are often able to handle them in their daily lives.

When it comes to health related issues, there are even more factors that complicate communication, though. Most of the time, a doctor's visit can't be planned and it is therefore **hard to organize sign language interpreters** in advance. In addition, there is a scarcity of sign language interpreters in Vienna. Finally, public health **information is not available** in sign language most of time. Due to these **barriers**, deaf people are often also not able to take informed decisions concerning their health or to take preventive measures.

### **The situation at Marien pharmacy**

Three deaf people work at Marien pharmacy in Vienna, among them Austria's **only deaf pharmacist**. Mag. pharm. Sreco Dolanc studied pharmacy in Slovenia and found at Marien pharmacy a workplace, where he is able to work in the field of pharmaceutical consultation. He is giving pharmaceutical advice to deaf clients in Austrian sign language and to hearing clients with the help of a sign language interpreter. The employment and training of deaf people and networking with various institutions for deaf people, made even more clear to us, which **barriers deaf people face in our health system**. Finally, these experiences and learnings led to the development of this project.

### **Goals and measures**

Our primary goal is to establish a professional contact point for deaf people at Marien pharmacy. This means, that deaf people should be given the chance to get professional **consultation and information**, in order to be able to take self-determined and informed decisions concerning their health. Active networking with important partners from the deaf community should aim to involve the target group and to form cooperations.

Based on these goals, the Marien pharmacy took various **measures** since the start of this project in 2015:

- Up until now, Marien pharmacy and Mag. pharm. Sreco Dolanc produced **more than 40 information videos in sign language** on various health topics like vaccination, contraception, flu or sun protection. All videos are published on the homepage of Marien pharmacy ([www.marienapo.eu/gehoerlos](http://www.marienapo.eu/gehoerlos)) and on its YouTube channel. For hearing people, all videos have **undertitles**.
- In autumn 2017, Marien pharmacy started to cooperate with the two psychotherapists Dr. Liv Zaslowski and Mag. Stephanie Häfele-Hausmann, who are also sign language interpreters. As a result, a **video series in sign language** on the special topic of **mental health** has been established. In these videos, Mag. pharm. Sreco Dolanc interviews one of the psychotherapists on a certain topic. This format is very suitable when trying to explain complicated and sensitive issues such as depression, burn-out or mobbing.
- Since 2017 short seasonal health tips from Mag. pharm. Sreco Dolanc are published on **gebaerdenwelt.tv**, a video news portal in sign language from the Austrian Federation of the Deaf. This cooperation allows us to better reach the deaf community in Vienna.
- In order to offer barrier-free health information in sign language to elderly people as well, Mag. pharm. Sreco Dolanc started to hold **short lectures on various health topics** at the senior center of Vienna's oldest deaf union WITAF.
- Since January 2015 **Marien pharmacy's newsletter** is barrier-free as well: The e-mail is sent out together with a link to a video where the content of the newsletter is explained in **Austrian Sign Language**.

## Results and development of the project

Through intensive networking with the most important deaf unions, all measures could be **quickly publicized in Vienna's deaf community**. Sign language videos, for example, are published on the pharmacy's homepage and Facebook page, where deaf unions share them.

Every day, deaf people visit Marien Apotheke to see Mag. Dolanc and to get information about their medication and other health related issues in sign language. As Mag. Dolanc is deaf himself and therefore part of deaf culture, he functions as **expert peer-person** and enjoys a lot of **trust** from deaf community. Moreover, he is well aware of barriers and obstacles deaf people face in the health system. Misunderstandings that occur in doctor-patient-encounterings without sign language interpreters can often be cleared up at the pharmacy.

On a regular basis, groups of young deaf adults from *equalizent*, a training center for deaf people, visit our pharmacy. During these study trips they learn about apprenticeships and work in pharmacies and see Mag. Dolanc as role model.

As Marien pharmacy became known in Austria's deaf community, also **deaf unions and other institutions from outside Vienna** became interested in Mag. Dolanc's lectures and health talks. As a consequence he already held **lectures** at Lower Austria's Federation of the Deaf and at the annual meeting of Austria's deaf-blind community in Upper Austria. Moreover, Marien pharmacy regularly attends **community-events** like the Viennese BiGeKu-Day – an info-event for deaf people where institutions from the areas of education, health and culture meet.

Through networking we could also initiate projects for deaf people in other areas. Our pharmacy cooperates with the retirement home at Loquaiplatz in Vienna's 6<sup>th</sup> district that established a **club for deaf retirees**, employed a deaf carer and reserved places for the deaf people at the home. In 2015, Marien pharmacy also initiated stronger networks with doctors and health care centers in the neighborhood in order to **sensitize** more people working in health care **for the needs of deaf patients**.

This project aims to **reduce barriers in health care for deaf people** on a long-term basis. Together with partners from deaf community and health care we constantly work on new ideas and define new key areas. In partnership with a deaf teacher we are developing a **barrier-free book for deaf school children** that deals with all aspects of health. Moreover, the pharmacy already works on a lot of other projects in order to focus on topics like barrier-free medication safety or HIV prevention.