

8. Medical treatment of disabilities

The impact of the Contergan scandal on the medical treatment of disabilities can hardly be overemphasized. Orthopedic medicine had become the primary discipline responsible for the treatment of so-called physical disabilities after 1945. Orthopedic specialists were responsible above all for the rehabilitation of disabled veterans of war and had a major influence on the definition of goals. According to the orthopedic view, the causes of physical damage were of secondary importance, and thus little attention was paid to the urgent need for clarification expressed by the victims. Instead, the objective was to replace missing or shortened limbs with prostheses in order to restore victims to the status of “full and valuable members of society,” as it was often described at the time. Medical practitioners and many contemporaries were of the opinion that victims should be “normalized” (in a visible sense as well), an approach that was ultimately devoted above all to integrating victims into the labor market. This approach still reflected a rather authoritarian concept of medicine, according to which it was up to the “demigod in white” to determine what was good for the patient and what was not.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, the Regional Councils and the university orthopedic clinic in Münster headed by Prof. Oskar Hepp played a leading role in this context. Government agencies maintained a passive stance towards both and confined themselves primarily to providing funding support. Numerous research projects were initiated in the following years, including studies on the development of the embryo in the womb and the medical rehabilitation of disabled persons. That has had a major impact on our knowledge, but also on our perception of disabilities. There were several important consequences: victims were afforded greater say in the matter, and more importance was attached to their needs, as evidenced in the field of orthopedics in particular. Hardly any child was willing to accept permanent prostheses.