



Georg Supp runs the therapy center PULZ in Freiburg, one of three “Certified McKenzie Clinics” in Germany, with Wolfgang Schoch. As international McKenzie Institute instructor he is traveling abroad and teaches courses. In 2017, he was twice in Tehran and could first of all dispel his own prejudices.

Abb.: G. Supp

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'You should question your own biases'

Georg Supp as Physiotherapist in Tehran Full of biases, Georg Supp traveled to Iran to teach McKenzie courses. He quickly threw his concerns overboard and was enthusiastic about the people there.



You have been in Iran as a physiotherapist. How do the colleagues work there and how is PT education structured?

Physiotherapy is an academic education in Iran. In addition to the bachelor's degree, which ends in eight semesters, master and doctorate are also possible. As in our country, therapists in their own private practice usually work many hours. Their earnings are pretty good. It is different with physiotherapists who are employed in clinics: low salaries and a difficult relationships between doctor and physios are the order of the day. There is a lot of competition, and physiotherapists often have a hard time to prevail. There is a very active professional association in Iran, the Iranian Physiotherapy Association.

Its chairman is involved in health policy and advocates a better position of physiotherapists. The association has been organizing congresses for years. In 2017 the first international congress with researchers from all over the world was held in Tehran. Iran is very interested in an international exchange.

And how did your visit to Tehran come about?

Since I'm active at McKenzie Institute International, I was at a conference in Denver in 2013. There I met the Iranian physiotherapist Afshin Heidar Abady, who is also a McKenzie therapist. He is very keen to see higher standards of physical therapy in Iran, and he suggested that the McKenzie educational program should be taught there.

Immediately, I found this exciting. When we met again at a conference in Copenhagen in 2015, we then got the idea off the ground with the International McKenzie Institute. So, it came about that in May 2017 I was there for two weeks and in August for eight days and taught courses.

What was your personal motivation for the trip?

So far I've always had a lot of reservations about anything from the Middle East. I thought the influence of religion was overpowering and we western people were seen as "infidels". The media and some politicians also give the impression that most of the terrorists come from this region. Therefore I was curious and wanted to question my own biases.

◀ **Fig. 1 Warm togetherness Georg Supp and Afshin Heidar Abady, who initiated McKenzie courses in Iran**

Of course, it was also the incentive to teach in a foreign country with a different culture. I like to adjust myself to new situations again and again. Now I am so happy that I took this trip because I learned an incredible amount. It was probably the most important trip of my life.

What made it happen?

The experience that there is a big difference between the regime and the people in the country. The political system, the mullah regime, has a questionable reputation and tries to control the people completely. On the other hand, there are these nice, respectable, warm hearted people, that are evolving despite all the restrictions.

Entertainment such as dancing, dating or alcohol is strictly forbidden for the people. They can use media such as Facebook or WhatsApp only to a limited extent. Despite of all this, they are fighting for a democratic state, gathering information internationally and continuing their education.

In addition to these experiences, I have learned to respect and follow various rules without questioning them. The greeting with a Persian woman, for example, can be wonderfully warm without shaking hands.

What is the difference between the German and Iranian working methods of the therapists and what surprised you?

I was surprised and impressed by the knowledge of the Iranian therapists - their theoretical foundations, which they brought with them from their academic education. Also, what they learned and read afterwards. They are not afraid to read articles and books in English. I miss this attitude in Germany, where many clinicians think that they must receive everything pre-chewed. German therapists often read and question too little.

On the other hand, there is a lack of implementation with patients in daily clinic. Patients often maintain a “make me healthy” attitude towards the therapist. Physicians tell patients how important allegedly technical devices and passive measures are.

International companies have discovered the Iranian market and are progressively marketing their electrical, ultrasound or shock wave therapy devices. They contribute to the problem. The promotion of passive modalities spoils the physiotherapy market, and therapists find it difficult to promote active therapy.



There is a very active physiotherapy community. The courses were fully booked.

In Germany, therapists complete many courses and look for “recipe solutions” for their patients.

Another difference is the appreciation for the lecturer. In Germany it is a matter of course for the participants that the lecturer does its job,

because he is paid for it. In Iran, participants value it much more that someone shares knowledge with them and wants them to have more success and joy at work.

With so much passive therapy, undressing is surely to be an issue during treatment!?

Yes. With same-sex people this is not a problem at all. In our courses, men undressed in a larger group, women did not.

In general, there are big differences between different treatments across different genders. Not everyone treats everyone, depending on how strictly the therapists live their religion. In the course situation there are women who do not shake hands with men and some who do it without any problems. The nice thing is that you respect each other and that you allow the other to practice gender segregation or not.

Were there any difficulties that you struggled with?

(considering). Nope, actually no difficulties. The only thing that was difficult (smiles) was to go for a run in long trousers at 38 degrees Celsius. Shorts are forbidden. But I wouldn't call this a true difficulty. Tehran is a safe city, and I could walk after sunset without any problems. I didn't want to drive a car there. I prefer to leave that to the locals. The traffic there seems to be quite “organic” - everything flows into one another. The rules are probably only accessible to the Iranians.

Fig. 2 Great atmosphere amongst the participants of the course in May in Tehran

Fig. 3 Therapists appreciate the exchange of thoughts during the course



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Fig. 4 Tradition and modern life:
The Square of Imam in Isfahan

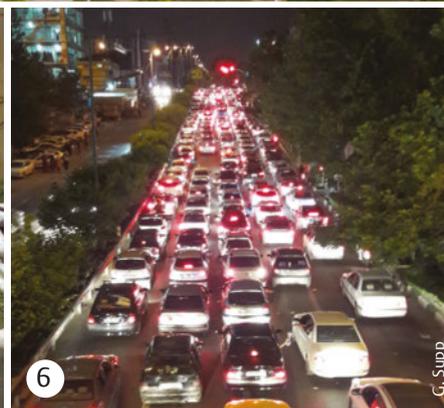


Fig. 5 Variety of spices on a market

Fig. 6 Crowded streets in Tehran

If it wasn't driving a car, were there other things that you particularly like about Iranian culture and the people there?

For Iranian people, tourists are still guests, not tourists. They take great pride in showing people from around the world their country. People are constantly inviting each other, and it becomes almost difficult to spend money when you are with locals.

It was also nice that I always had private accommodation during my stay and was heavily involved in family life. People are particularly proud of their culture and history. The sentence "Isfahan is half the world. Anyone who has not seen Isfahan has not seen half the world," I have heard it more than 100 times.

Iranians also want to dispel prejudice. It is very important to them what we think of them in the West and what kind of impression you get when you are there. The people want to make it clear that they are not terrorists and not all are religiously blinded.

Contrary to my expectations, nobody is badgering you and nobody is selling anything or cheating you. My ideas about the country that I brought from home were immediately refuted.



The only thing that was difficult: to go for a run in long trousers at 38° Celsius

This year you are planning a trip to Malawi. How do you combine your travels with your life in Freiburg?

On the one hand, I have great support from my partner in our practice and the great practice team. On the other hand, my family supports me. In Malawi I will hold a free charity course, which supports the training of Malawian physiotherapy there. It will be a completely different journey, but also very exciting.

What's your advice for German physiotherapists?

As a young physiotherapist, I would go to countries where I can still learn something therapeutically. I also recommend attending international congresses. These are incredibly inspiring, enriching and always provide you with new ideas. This is how my visits to Iran and Malawi came about. As an experienced therapist, you should give something back from time to time. That is also my attitude, why I like to teach in other countries.

And what kind of conclusion do you draw from the trip?

I really learned something for my life through this trip. Always question your own bias. Especially in relation to other countries and other people. In addition, you should only judge things after you have looked behind what they really are.

The interview was conducted by Isabelle Bonno.