

Serving with a Passion

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My younger brother's wife Queenie was going to AktivOrtho for her spinal problems, where its Chairman and Managing Director, Dr Gerd Mueller, an orthopaedic surgeon of international repute, convinced her that she could get better with graded active and passive treatment. The moment Queenie learnt this, she thought of my spinal problem which was twelve years old, and was making me undergo a lot of pain which was showing in my eyes and face. When she told me that I needed to see Dr Mueller, I was uncomfortable and hesitant. I did not want to leave my coping mechanism, a comfort zone which I had developed for myself over the years. However, after an hour or two, she told me that it was up to me to decide, but I must try to meet the doctor who was mature and grounded.

I did go to AktivOrtho after two days. I soon realised that Dr Mueller is a grounded, practical and mature doctor, who has a lot of experience not

only in orthopaedics but also has an equally rich experience in Orthopaedic rehabilitation, sports medicine and medical fitness. Dr Mueller was the Deputy Chairperson of Hamburg's largest orthopaedic hospital. Having pursued orthopaedic surgery for several years, he identified an increasingly prevalent need for effective rehabilitation and pain management and, since then, has devoted himself to



Dr Gerd Mueller

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the non-invasive treatment of orthopaedic and related ailments. He is pursuing this as his passion. There is a special emphasis on the patients themselves taking an active role in their recovery. AktivOrtho team works with the patients to help them feel and get better. Dr Mueller believes that many patients can be helped without invasive surgery. However, it can also help in taking informed decisions in case of patients who would need surgery, in spite of all the available graded exercises and treatment programmes. Such patients can again join AktivOrtho for getting mobile and maintaining fitness after the surgery.

Gradually, with each visit to AktivOrtho, I began to slowly think of doing things which I had forgotten about. I was always scared that these would break my back. I became over-conscious of my overweight as I was finding it difficult to manage. I had been realising that I needed to reduce it. There was always a disbelief when I told the doctors that for atleast twenty-six days in a month I was eating sensibly, never missing my exercises and morning walks, and yet I was easily getting exhausted. No one actually guided me as to how to start using abdominal muscles which I never used in the last twelve years as, whoever I went to, either smiled at my overweight or politely told me that I should reduce the weight. I was very frequently getting cramps, increasing pains, stiffness, high level water retention and vertigo. I had learnt to deal with all these by developing

copng mechanisms both at mental and physical levels, compromising with faulty posture, which would somehow, let me read, write, sit for long hours painfully in office and frequently take short and long flights for official tours.

I had developed respect and faith in Dr Mueller within a week. I made an effort to let go my fears. He made me realise that an attitude of positive thinking which I have is good, it is good to count one's blessings and thank god for those. He, however, explained to me that this was not enough. I needed to understand that it is not right to think that 'even with so much of pain, I am able to do all my tasks, tours, long sittings in office' at a time when so much is available to make one actually feel better. He said that because of my fear and the mental acceptance and capacity to tolerate pain, I had forgotten to use my abdominal muscles. I was overusing my back muscles, which was not going to help me to go on compromising, as eventually, this would incapacitate my functioning. My treatment during the first two weeks involved heat therapy, triggering of the painful spots to allow better circulation of blood, deep tissue massage to unlock the muscles which had not been used for years. I was scared of movement as these would easily bring vertigo attacks, I was encouraged to go on a machine which would help me balance during fast movement and increase flexibility. I began to feel better after six sessions, became confident that I could manage myself even during

a lot of movement. Within no time, I learnt to stand without fear as Dr Mueller and the physiotherapists encouraged me by repeating, 'all muscles which need to work to help you remain stable will gradually begin to work'. With this my fear of movement disappeared. Nidhi and Frances helped me in the initial difficult phases, and then Lipi for a while under Dr Mueller's gentle but mature guidance, and his ability to take quick but right decisions to change the course of treatment. Treatment and exercises with the physiotherapists trained by him made me do things I could not. I became aware of my abdominal muscles. I also learnt how to bend forward sitting on a chair to use the abdominal muscles throughout the day.

Dr Mueller's wisdom in taking a decision was objective when I asked him if I needed to undergo kidney function test as the water retention was heavy. He said, "No, we will flush it out with a special kind of massage, lymphatic drainage." He got all the exercises stopped for more than a week. A month later when I went in for tests, the kidney function test was actually normal. My cramps have reduced both in intensity and frequency, the high level water retention has reduced with a massage for lymphatic drainage, and flexibility has increased with deep tissue massage. My posture has become better. Teachers could help every child by identifying what he/she cannot do and then helping her/him to overcome the levels of difficulty by

assuring the child that it will be possible. Improvement in every child by bringing in objectivity, keen observation by teachers, hand holding, reposing faith in child would make Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation meaningful for every child.

My muscles which were non-functional for years are gradually becoming functional. With deep tissue massage and exercises, I have become more comfortable and know which exercises to do when I get exhausted. The flexibility of my body is slowly increasing. I have started understanding that exercises on the machines will help me only if I understand, assess my needs and evaluate progress and difficulties with Dr Mueller and the physiotherapists.

Each visit and discussion with Dr Mueller reminds me of the participatory approach that National Curriculum Framework (NCF-2005) advocates and envisages for better teaching-learning processes. The participatory approach to evaluation where the stakeholders participate with evaluators, themselves become aware of the need to address the issues which have bottlenecks. The initial resistance of the stakeholders gradually disappears as they become confident with their participation, and with a lot of evidence coming from the fields – schools, teachers, parents, functionaries and the administrators – for the need to change for better results. Once the stakeholders begin to get confident and believe that a critical input would help in addressing the

unaddressed issues, a better delivery of quality initiatives in education introduced by the States and Union Territories is assured. A decision can be taken for a mid-term correction after assessing and evaluating the needs of the learners, stakeholders and teachers' needs as well for meaningful training programmes. The participatory approach does help the States/Union Territories to take a decision to improve, replicate and upscale programmes/initiatives in the area of school education.

Dr Mueller's positive attitude to help every patient while maintaining his/her dignity, continuously reminds me of Children with Special Needs. Years of my visits to schools, both urban and rural in States/UTs, it has been a painful experience to observe these children either getting totally ignored or typecasted. It is hard to believe that there is a total lack of concern and sensitivity for these children. The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Education for All) has a lot of concern in its schemes for Children with Special Needs. The Right to Education Act 2009 envisages concern for quality education for every child in the age group of 6-14 years of age. The Act has given great concern for these children. To ensure quality education of every child in this age group, the Children with Special Needs need to be accepted, treated with dignity and provided enabling learning environment in schools. The children who do not do well in academics are also treated badly in schools and

homes. The teachers and the parents want children to do extremely well. Never do they want to find out the reason of their not doing well. Some children could be emotionally disturbed, some could be finding it difficult to cope with the increasing learning gaps and there could be many other reasons. Dr Mueller believes in treating pain by addressing all dimensions of a person's life – physical, social, emotional and psychological. This holistic approach brings positive results. Our teachers need to understand children, their backgrounds, their areas of difficulties, creating situations where all of them can participate in teaching-learning processes in different ways. Hand holding and, trying to assure children that they can do well, would go a long way to help these children.

I have heard of Indian doctors who worked abroad and returned to India with the hope of serving patients in their country with better professional learning and experience from various countries they worked in. Some came back as their parents were getting old and were the only child of their parents. I have no idea as to how many doctors from overseas have come back to our country to serve the people. I have come across only one, Dr Mueller, who has moved to India with his wife Gabrielle and two small children. His son Charlie is six years old and daughter Ava is four years old. His wife looks after the management aspects of AktivOrtho. He has determined to be in India to serve people with ortho and



Dr Gerd Mueller

nerve related issues. He often tries to go beyond these to help his patients deal with their difficulties, improve and stay fit.

There has never been a question or an anxiety of any patient which has not been addressed to by Dr Mueller. He finds time and patience to address their anxieties which saves patients from losing their confidence. His unique technique of mobilisation gives immediate relief to patients.

When electricity cuts are there, most of us at home and in our offices do crib a lot, never hesitate to blame the government for not being able to provide the basic amenities. For days, the air conditioning at AktivOrtho did not work, for the comfort of the patients, big pedestal fans were placed in all the rooms. During this period one of the machines got burnt. There was no fuss at all as every physiotherapist and the reception desk were all working normally. I was a little upset as Dr Mueller had taken a very challenging

decision, not an easy one to leave his country at a time when the heat was at its peak in India, to follow his passion to make people with ortho problems feel better. I shared my concern with him that he and his family must be finding it difficult to adjust in such high temperatures. It surely must have been a challenge to convert an ordinary building into a beautiful pain management and rehabilitation AktivOrtho clinic, facing the difficulties of dealing with contractors, getting all the equipments, machines from Germany and shifting to two houses as the first one had some problems. Dr Mueller's calm answer to this was, "I have accepted the challenge and I will adjust to any and everything and so will my family." His wife firmly supports Dr Mueller's vision and does all that she can, with two small children.

Gradually, I discovered in Dr Mueller the depth of understanding of human issues. He is a person who speaks little but is fully aware, a thinker and highly evolved intellectually. His devotion to his profession both as an orthopaedic surgeon, and now guiding pain management and healing people without surgery, his intense interaction with patients, doctors, physiotherapists has brought in him great understanding and clarity. This has led him to publish widely on sports medicine, biomechanics of spine and back pain treatment in research journals. His book *The Lumbar Spine* is beautifully brought out. It has inputs of a psychologist and a pain

specialist, algesiologist. One is used to seeing books in orthopaedics by orthopaedic surgeons. The involvement of a psychologist and a pain specialist enriches the value and contribution of this book in orthopaedics. This book and his various articles on orthopaedics and pain management are consulted by a large number of researchers and practitioners.

mental decision to keep updating our knowledge. We must also make an effort to keep in view every child's need. Dr Mueller comes across as a well-read person, who reads a lot, discusses larger issues and concerns. I was happy and surprised to discover that he finds time to read out books like Richard Bach's *Flight of Jonathan Livingston Seagull* to his children. I noticed him



Examining the Spine of the Patient

Most of the doctors I respect are excellent in their field and in making their patients feel better. They do read everything to update themselves in their field of specialisation, publishing papers and attending conferences. They have little time to read other books and classics. Unfortunately, most of us as academics have given up reading which is not directly related to our work. Each one of us in the academic world and each one of us dealing with children's education at school level could take a

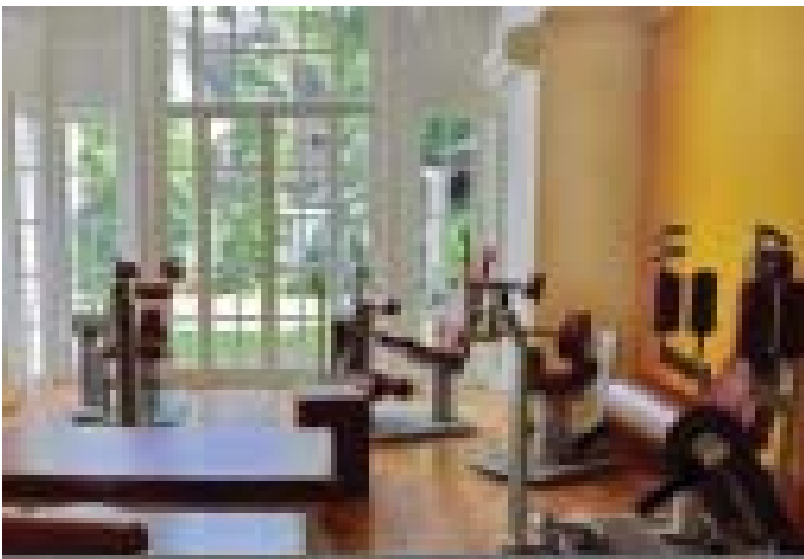
appreciating Charlie's painting and gently discussing Ava's concerns. We all love to see his small kids at AktivOrtho.

It did come to my mind that most of us as parents have a very high level of expectation from our children. We leave them to teachers who may treat them cruelly or disrespectfully. We, as a matter of fact, support them so that our children fulfil our dreams for them. Parents have never had a desire to talk to their children to find out as to what is it that they are interested in, what are

their dreams. The home and the schools are providing a limited kind of enabling environment for learning, but, never for making children realise their dreams. I had shared my anxiety with you about children losing their childhood in an article ‘Where has their childhood disappeared!’ published in an earlier issue. How I wish parents could find time to interact with their children to share their joys and anxieties, and to let them know that they will always be there with them to find solutions to their problems.

Dr Mueller keeps counting his blessings as he is a very positive person. He really adores and reveres his mother Gertrud Mueller. She is a very bright, highly motivated and hard working person. She not only takes care of herself at the age of 80, but also is able

to show many other gestures of kindness to those around her in Ochsenfurt, a town in Bavaria (near Munich). Dr Mueller was born in this town. His eyes brighten up when he feels proud of her intellectual inclinations. He respects his father, who is no more. He feels blessed and satisfied that his wife Gabrielle makes all the efforts to make AktivOrtho welcome patients with a beautiful ambience with a sense of purpose. She manages all this while taking care of her two small children and their lovely home. I experienced Gabrielle’s sensitivity when I had a breakdown at AktivOrtho, a day before my late husband’s birthday. Gabrielle sat with me in the Health Bar, got me a glass of water, talked to me and made a great effort to help me come back to normal.



An exercise room at AktivOrtho

Each exercise/treatment room has a message as simple as 'relax', 'calm', etc. Many exercise/treatment rooms have been named after the names of players. I am reminded of an incident when Dr Mueller was in the exercise room where Deepika and I were laughing and, our physiotherapists had also joined us. He quietly said with a smile, "This is a place where we need to focus which is possible when we are serious". The subtle message left a mark and all of us keep that in mind. This has come to my mind more vividly, as a few days back, in September 2012, a 14-year-old boy died in a school in Hyderabad where, for as small a mistake as chatting in the class, the teacher asked Ismail Hussain to do 300 sit-ups. The boy pleaded to be excused as he had a rod implanted in one of his legs in an operation. The teacher did not bother. Ismail died of exhaustion, shock, fear and humiliation in a hospital. This has also brought back to my mind the death of a girl child, Shanno, in Delhi where the teacher made her do similar kind of cruel act, and refused to give her water to drink in the scorching heat, despite Shanno's repeated requests.

There is a provision at the Health Bar of AktivOrtho for tea/coffee for its staff, patients and for the attendants who accompany the patients. Water is offered by any staff member who sees a patient walking in. It is also a place for patients to have tea/coffee, discuss with each other or the therapists, issues of general nature. Dr Mueller never hesitates to come down to the Health

Bar or exercise rooms to discuss critical issues with patients. This could be practised by our teachers and head teachers. Most of us would recall how scared we used to be when we were given the message that the head teacher wanted to see us in his/her office or the teacher wanted to see us in the staff room. Generally, it used to be a humiliating experience, it still is, as discipline at any cost and doing well in studies at any cost continue to be the mindset of most of the teachers and head teachers. We need to keep in view the child's strengths to motivate him/her. Gradually, he/she will become good at what was earlier difficult to achieve.

There is no fixed place for patients to meet Dr Mueller. He makes himself available keeping in view each patient's comfort. He would come from his office on the second floor to the first and ground floors atleast twenty times a day without letting anyone of us ever know what an effort it is for him in terms of both time and energy. The communication of reminders for the scheduled appointments is sensitive to the patients' sudden changes in their schedules. These are received regularly. In cases of emergency, slots are created to accommodate patients who need immediate attention.

I am reminded of an incident when Dr Mueller had been discussing my problems with me for about twenty minutes when a phone call from his friend in Germany informed him that his kids had met with an accident. He was upset and wanted to immediately

call back to arrange their admission to an emergency of a hospital for treatment. He saw me struggling to stabilise after sitting for so long. Dr Mueller waited till I stabilised and then literally ran to his cabin to help out his friend's children. Each time coming back from AktivOrtho, I think of many children with special needs who suffer endlessly. My worry remains, as after years of our policy concerns, no one finds time for them. I have been thinking for years as to why it is not possible for our teachers to be not only sensitive themselves, but also find time to create sensitivity among children, parents community and school functionaries. How I have been wishing that a sensitivity of the AktivOrtho kind could be created for our children with special needs, somebody to hold their hand. Each class can have a team assigned with the task of taking care of the special needs of these children without letting their dignity compromised. It is not difficult; the will to do it is all that is required, the rest falls in place. Dr Mueller has successfully done it in six AktivOrtho centres in Germany – one in Hamburg, three in Berlin, one each in Bonn and Bremen. All these centres are patient-centred with sensitivity and handholding as values. He has managed to make it possible in Delhi. In some ways, he brings back Dr Albert Schweitzer's memory, who did an unparalleled service in South Africa to heal the suffering humanity with humility. He built a hospital there.

It is so satisfying to listen from Team AktivOrtho, how caring a person Dr Mueller is. Nidhi shared with me an incident when the AktivOrtho building did not have functional toilets. During this period, the staff was using a closeby hotel's facilities. However, after some time there was objection to this by the hotel staff. Dr Mueller who was in a meeting there made all the staff participants of the meeting he was in. His AktivOrtho staff were not only allowed to use the toilets, but were served lunch as well. Dr Mueller and his wife Gabrielle allowed the entire staff to use toilets of their home, a rare gesture of human goodness in the fast paced professional world came from both of them. The head teachers and each one of us could learn that we need to take a stand for those who work with us and take care of their needs. Frances, Nidhi, Lipi, Shuchi, Ankur, Hari, Rohan and Abdul appreciate the sensitivity of Dr Mueller and his wife. Christina feels very proud observing the patients' feeling of immense respect for Dr Mueller and Gabrielle's commitment to AktivOrtho. She takes great pride in the fact that she is from Germany, Dr Mueller's country. Tony, who is also from Germany, feels very proud of Dr Mueller's recognition for professional excellence in his field.

It is a contribution of a rare kind of both husband and wife to have created a team which has sensitivity and empathy for every patient. I had been having fluctuating blood pressure and high heart rate. Dr Mueller was always

there to guide what my physiotherapist needed to do and on one occasion when it got worse with very high heart rate, he was in constant touch with Christina. Dr Mueller who himself is new to Delhi said to me every time, "I am not good at internal medicine, I can arrange everything to help you come out of a difficult health situation." Out of the total two months, there were four such difficult incidents which were gently handled by Christina under his guidance. Many a times, Dr Mueller reminds me of Braithwaite's 'To Sir with Love' where the young teacher stands by his students in every situation. This has been making me think of children who have learning difficulties or challenges of physical kind; little attention is paid to their difficulties. Many are asked to leave schools. In Jamnabai Narsee School, Mumbai, parents of a seven-year-old autistic boy have been asked to take their child to another institute. The Bombay Municipal Corporation asked the school to readmit the child if the parents provided for a shadow teacher. At a time, when the country is moving towards inclusive education and has made Education as a Fundamental Right of every child in the age group of 6-14 years, such incidents happening in a Juhu school is a cause for serious concern. I wish that the Maharashtra State Commission for Protection of Child Right's intervention helps (*Times of India*, 3 October 2012). Children and their parents would find themselves in a big crisis to find a school for them

which would not only accept these children but provide support. Head teachers and teachers could find ways to help these children with the help of other children. A caution needs to be exercised in these situations – whatever solutions and strategies are collectively planned should be implemented in a sensitive and subtle manner. The need for empathy should never be mixed up with sympathy.

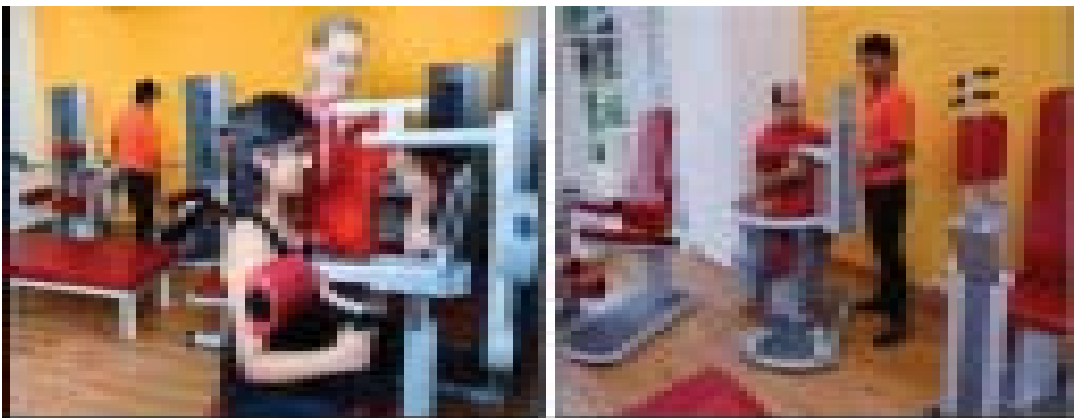
Dr Mueller was given the responsibility and task of providing guidelines to develop an approach to improve the treatment of back pain in Europe by "Prevention of back pain" committee. He also served as a founding member of the Federal Work Group on "Management of chronic back pain". This reminds me of Prof. Daniel Stufflebeam who chaired the 'Joint Evaluation Committee' for developing standards for evaluation. Prof. Stufflebeam is held in high esteem in the academic world. He was eighty-five years old when we met him at Western Michigan University's Evaluation Centre in 2012. Dr Mueller has been able to achieve this at a much younger age which indicates his wonderful skills of bringing experts together, dealing with different viewpoints, mindsets and most difficult of all making everyone reach a consensus. The entire process establishes credence for the high level of Dr Mueller's understanding and standing in the field of orthopaedics. The most crucial criterion that factors into an assignment of such a kind is the faith which is reposed in the person.

Graded exercise programme is developed for each patient as per his/her needs. Training of weak muscle groups, balance harmonisation and stretching, deep tissue massages are helping almost each one of us to get and feel better. In addition, we are also made aware of other health activities to promote overall performance. Regular follow ups as well as home exercises are also given as part of the prevention programme so as to achieve maximum benefit for the patient and maintain it as well. Involvement of children and their parents in schools can bring in a change in the mindset of both teachers and children that every child can do better with a little support from teachers and parents. The moment the pressure to perform is taken away, each child will perform better.

It is possible for everyone to get better. The feedback of physiotherapists describes the inputs and how the patient is doing. The method of observation helps in every session to assess the areas of difficulties of each

patient. Patients are encouraged to do self-assessment about the progress, process and improvement. The participatory approach makes the patients a part of both the treatment and assessment process. I am continuously reminded of Source Books on Assessment at Primary Level, developed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) where the need to change from mundane assessment process to meaningful assessment is beautifully discussed along with discussions on how this could be done in different subject areas. Corrective measures are discussed and applied, sometimes gradually, and sometimes aggressively at AktivOrtho. Teachers could make a similar effort with the help of their colleagues and students to help children overcome their areas and levels of difficulties.

There is flexibility as to how much and what can an individual patient do. A need to accommodate the immediate,



Physiotherapists working with the patients

and then, the long term benefit of the patient is never lost sight of. A variety of aids/equipments of international standard are there for use. Patients are busy with their own schedules. Progress is assessed in qualitative terms on all aspects with a holistic approach in view. There is a challenge for the patient, the physiotherapist and for Dr Mueller all the time. The AktivOrtho is patient centred. The fact that each patient is involved in planning, development and implementation of his/her treatment plan helps in the plan's effective implementation. Its philosophy that every patient has the potential to improve and participate in his/her treatment and well being is transacted in its true spirit.

New patients are encouraged from the first meeting itself to discuss the treatment plan with Dr Mueller and the attending physiotherapist. The physiotherapists are expected to provide a feedback to him on areas of difficulties of each and every patient, and in cases of patients with high



Discussing the MRI with a Patient

difficulty levels, Dr Mueller leaves many important meetings and tasks to discuss with the physiotherapists as to how to make such patients get better. For many such cases there is a discussion before and after the sessions. No panic is ever created. A physiotherapist is there with the patient throughout his/her session. This is closely monitored by Dr Mueller himself without getting noticed most of the times. Teachers can do similar exercises to make Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) in schools meaningful where every child can learn and realise his/her potential without fear and pressure.

It has been a satisfying experience to see thirty-four years old Deepika getting back to normal. She had been coming to AktivOrtho for three months. She is working as an executive of a company in London. She has the following to say:

“I had been suffering from sciatica pain since 2008. I have two small kids to look after and a demanding job. I wanted to be free of pain and fatigue. I had very low energy levels. In West, the doctors put you on Gabapantin for sciatica which has lot of side effects. I had been on drugs for pain as well, since 2008. I was sick of taking drugs after drugs. Eventually, I came to Dr Mueller, who told me that exercises are good and with a programme, specially planned for me, I would feel better. He explained the relationship between drugs and pain as well as the role of

exercises in making one get better. Within two months, I am off medical drugs and pain free. The deep tissue massage has freed my muscles locked for years. The graded exercise plan has helped me a lot. There has been a positive change in my attitude. Energy wise I am feeling better as I can now jump out of bed within no time. I look forward to coming to AktivOrtho. I am always going to come back for a rehabilitation programme at AktivOrtho. Exercises, eating right with vitamins have done me a lot of good.”

Mr Chhabra, a well-established businessman, has had a very nice experience at AktivOrtho. He had a stroke several years back and was having problems of coordination and balance. “It was a very destabilising experience, but I have started feeling better within 6-8 weeks. I like coming here. Dr Mueller and his team have worked to make me feel better. Dr Mueller inspires me. I like coming here and will continue to come.”

Rehabilitation after a surgery is as important as the surgery itself. This is true of all surgeries. I am experiencing its role in recovery at AktivOrtho after my recent Lap chole surgery for gall bladder removal. As a matter of fact, the two months of treatment enabled me to go in for surgery with my back

becoming better, water retention, cramps and vertigo coming under control.

When we begin to believe that each child has the potential to do better and also let her/him know that, a positive change comes in the life of every child. The child comes up in his/her own esteem, has enhanced confidence level and makes every effort to do everything better. When you, as teachers and head teachers, accept a challenge to bring in flexibility to accommodate every child’s learning, physical, mental and emotional needs, you will work to bring in all the resources you need to ensure that every child learns and achieves what he or she is good at, and even make a special effort, making it a possibility for doing what he/she is not good at. When you feel that you need to take an extra step for a few children with special needs, you will be able to do it by creating sensitivity everywhere, in schools, homes, community and public places. You will be able to plan, develop and implement anything and everything for every child, especially the ones who need you more. Everything will become a possibility for you, once you become passionate and develop commitment to bring about a change of attitude and a determination to bring a positive change in every child’s life.