

# Human Rights Training with Actors

International guests practice real-life situations with actors at Austrian Ombudsman Board

by [Petra Tempfer](#)

**Vienna.** “Will the lady now go back to her therapy?”, one of the participants of the workshop held by the International Ombudsman Institute (IOI) asked on Monday. As the only global organization for Ombudsman institutions worldwide the IOI held this training workshop on the topic of preventive human rights monitoring. Just now two male participants asked a woman who seemed distressed about the conditions of her placement in a therapeutic facility. She says that doctors who treat her change too often. She would like to have more continuity. The 45-year old woman, who sits there in a buttoned-up blue cardigan, explains that one of her room mates is very restless, which is why she has troubles to sleep. Whenever she rings the bell for the nurse however, the nurse does not always come.

## 187 member institutions from around 100 countries

The woman mentioned before does not have to go back to therapy. She is an actress, who is specially trained to perform the behaviour of patients with psychiatric conditions in training sessions for medical students. During the workshop, she helped participants practice the communication skills they need when carrying out their preventive human rights mandate. Participants were prepared to these role plays with actors. The latter however performed



The prison inmate interviewed by Antonia Kyriakidou from Cyprus is traumatized, but only an actor. In the background Ombudsman Kräuter and - on his left - head of commission Fischer

their role so convincingly, that some of those present could not yet believe their real identity as actors.

The focus of the training workshop held at the premises of the Austrian Ombudsman Board this week is to learn about targeted yet sensitive and empathetic ways of communicating with clients. It is the third edition of this training cycle. Last year staff from Ombudsman institutions around the world gathered in Lithuania and the year before that in Latvia. This time 29 participants mainly from Europe but also from African countries joined the event. Currently the IOI, which was founded in 1978, has 187 member institutions from around 100 different countries. In 2013 Austrian Ombudsman Günther Kräuter took on the role of the IOI's Secretary General.

In Austria six expert commissions monitor institutions where persons are or may be deprived of their liberty – this includes correctional institutions, nursing homes and psychiatric facilities – according to the respective UN mandate for five years now. The main objective is to identify risk factors for possible human rights violations and to prevent them from happening. The members of the commissions can carry out confidential interviews with residents and patients.

The participants of the workshop meanwhile moved on to a round of feedback. An apparently recovered patient with a casually unbuttoned cardigan – the actress who no longer is in her role – provides professional feedback about how she felt during the questioning as a patient. Talking about the problem with the frequently changing doctors has been one of her

main concerns. However, she would have liked more detailed questions about her everyday routine, which was rigidly structured and therefore perceived as a burden by her. In general, she would also have preferred talking to a woman instead of two men.

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In practice the preference of same-sex conversation partners is usually taken into consideration when planning an interview, Gabriele Fischer, psychiatrist at the University of Vienna and head of one of the Austrian NPM commissions explains. She is leading one of the groups through the first day of the workshop. As far as the frequent change of doctors is concerned, this would violate basic human rights standards, if the patient feels an additional burden due to this lack of continuity. As a basic right, the patient also should not have to share her room with a restless person.

In the course of Monday afternoon other situations are practiced – among others with a traumatized prison inmate, who is also played by an actor. He tries to avoid answering the questions asked by Antonia Kyriakidou from the Ombudsman institution of Cyprus and keeps asking: “How can you help me?” To that Fischer adds that one of the main priorities when interviewing

persons concerned is to clarify the mandate and what you can do. While it is of course important to recognize the interviewee's needs, it is also essential to keep a certain personal distance.

## Livestream interview with former inmate

On Tuesday participants accompany two members of the Austrian NPM commissions on a visit at a residential home for older persons and a visit to the NEUSTART association, where a former prison inmate is being interviewed. Kräuter explains that these interviews are followed via livestreams to abide by the “do-no-harm” principle and to avoid disturbing the interviewees by larger delegations.

Kräuter further explains, that the technical equipment for the realization of these livestreams was provided by Cisco and developed by the IT company X-tention, who originally designed a similar solution for a child suffering from leukemia, who was then able to follow classes via livestream. During the workshop participants in the training room are watching the interview – that is simultaneously interpreted into English – on a large screen and can afterwards communicate with the members of the commissions to ask questions.

On Wednesday the workshop ends with closing rounds of discussions. Next year a follow-up training is planned in Scandinavia.