



Vardan Tadevosyan is the director of the Rehabilitation Centre in Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Between 1988 and 1994, the small enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in the south Caucasus was the site of a brutal conflict, including the attempted ethnic cleansing of the Armenian population by Azerbaijan.

The war left many people in Nagorno-Karabakh with severe injuries. Vardan, who was working at a hospital in Armenia at the time, recalls: *"Their situation was tragic. They had to get treatment in Yerevan [the capital of Armenia], which was very expensive and for many, impossible. Rehabilitation requires continued treatment. When I came to Karabakh I found that many of my former patients had died, because of pressure sores, organ problems and other problems that they could not manage. So it was time to have such a rehabilitation centre here."*

With the support of Baroness Cox, Vardan established a Rehabilitation Centre in a bomb-damaged school building in Stepanakert. He brought together a small team, introducing them to the concept of rehabilitation and ensuring they received the training and qualifications they needed. Since then, the team has grown rapidly and the centre has developed into an internationally recognised Centre of Excellence. Their team includes 50 people across a range of specialities: *"we are not only doing physical therapy and occupational therapy, but also we have a psychologist, speech therapist, art therapists and sport therapists. This team are working together to bring people with different kinds of disabilities to an independent life – to go back to their community, to be easily integrated."*

At the very heart of Vardan's work is a commitment to breaking down the stigma surrounding disability. In the Soviet Union, people with disabilities were regularly 'warehoused' in institutions and kept separate from the community. *"I grew up in the former Soviet Union. I almost never saw any person with disabilities outside. Nothing was accessible for them. There were special institutions where they could live, but ... it was not rehabilitation."*

The legacy of this marginalisation and stigmatisation endures in post-Soviet states. Vardan is passionate about challenging this stigma, and making society more inclusive and accessible to the disabled. *"We give the chance to people with different disabilities to understand their abilities and their rights, and to feel there is not any shame. This is also good education for the community – the community see that people with disabilities... can be with them in political life, social life, in everything that is in the community. This is one of the best achievements of the last few years."*

Vardan's commitment to the centre, its patients and its staff is evident in the joy he derives from his work: *"I am a really lucky man, having such work - bringing people benefits and a happy life. Even in the future, when I won't be here, this project never will stop. This is the most important thing... [that] even without us, without the people who started this project, it will be continued - because all these staff can train new staff, and they can be here for the future. What can be better than this?"*

Watch the full interview at www.hart-uk.org/locations/nagorno-karabakh.

Read the report from our most recent visit at <http://www.hart-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Nagorno-Karabakh-Visit-Report-2014.pdf>.