

## Summary of the Comparative European Study on Language and Culture Mediation

### 1. Introduction

Language and cultural mediation is a new field of research and work that is still in the development phase and has only recently started to receive attention in Germany. There are different definitions, concepts and historical developments on this topic in various countries.

However, what is language and cultural mediation exactly? Not only are the terms used inconsistently in the various European countries and sometimes even within the countries, but the related understanding and functions range from mere interpreting to cultural mediation or counseling in the health care, social welfare or educational sector. In contrast to classic interpreting, so-called language and cultural mediation primarily takes place in the nonprofit or public service sector.

Language and cultural mediation presupposes that successful communication goes beyond the application of language skills and often requires more, such as knowledge about the cultural background. Generally, therefore, it can be said that language and cultural mediators interpret and communicate sociocultural background so as to guarantee communication between non-German-speaking clients and institutions providing standard care in the field of health care, social services and education. Through their work they forge a link between the institutions, e.g. hospitals, psychosocial centers, doctor's offices, counseling offices and other social services, and their non-German-speaking clients.

Why are language and cultural mediators employed? In their Canadian study Smedley, Stith and Nelson were the first to demonstrate (in 2003) that ethnic minorities systematically receive health care of inferior quality compared to the majority society. The reasons for this are stereotypes, prejudices and uncertainties on the part of the health care providers, a conditional framework that is characterized by cost saving and does not meet the needs of patients of ethnic minorities as well as language and cultural differences that lead to misunderstandings during treatment (Bowen 2001)<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, communication in daily life between immigrants and representatives of the host country should be supported with the help of language and cultural mediators. The "clients" of language and cultural mediators are frequently minorities in the host country (immigrants, asylum seekers, foreign workers, refugees, etc.) and the second party involved, as already stated, i.e. representatives of government agencies and institutions in the host country that have to communicate with clients speaking another language. In addition to better language skills, the representatives of the host country also often have a different spectrum of knowledge and experience from the members of the language minority. There is often not only a difference between the two parties in terms of the level of education, but heterogeneous value systems and patterns of thought as well as different sociocultural conventions and norms additionally play a major role. Thus the interpreters represent a link between the two parties aimed at compensating for the asymmetric power divide between the two parties and eliminating language and cultural

<sup>1</sup> See in this connection: Bowen S. Language Barriers in Access to Health Care. Canada: Health Canada, 2001: 120. (Report prepared for the conference: Critical Link 3 – Interpreting in the Community: the complexity of the profession, Montreal, Canada, May 22-26, 2001).

barriers. In this way language and cultural mediators extensively prevent time-consuming misunderstandings as well as costly multiple treatment and counseling.

Depending on the immigration situation in the respective countries, among other things, the concept of language and cultural mediation has received increasing attention in recent years, initially in Canada and the US and subsequently in Europe as well. The EU countries are becoming increasingly aware of their situation as immigration countries, giving rise to social and cultural diversity and new challenges. New approaches and problem-solving strategies for dealing with immigration in a constructive manner are therefore required. Language and cultural mediation is a very complex and multifaceted field that has been subject to little scientific research. In Germany as well as in some of the other countries examined the job description and/or role and benefits of language and cultural mediators in practice are controversial and have not yet been developed significantly. Nevertheless, it is possible to learn from the development in other countries, where the concept and recognition as an occupation have been researched and have thus advanced further at both the national and the local level.

## **2. Comparative study on language and cultural mediation in various European countries**

The individual European countries have had varying experience with target groups, concepts and practical implementation in the field of language and cultural mediation to date. To some extent data on this experience have been recorded and compiled within the framework of the comparative study on language and cultural mediation in various European states with the aim of getting a general idea of the heterogeneous practice of language and cultural mediation in these countries and supporting knowledge and experience transfer at the European level. The study was conducted within the framework of the transnational cooperation of the TransKom Development Partnership, which is part of the AIM transnational partnership of the EQUAL European Community initiative. The results of the European comparison shall be inputted in the national study on language and cultural mediation in Germany currently conducted by the SpraKuM subproject of the TransKom Development Partnership. In the SpraKuM project, carried out by Diakonie Wuppertal, refugees and asylum seekers are trained as language and cultural mediators and placed on the labor market. SpraKuM is additionally involved in establishing a job description for "language and integration mediators for immigrants" in Germany. The results of the study are primarily aimed at supporting the efforts towards recognition of the job description in Germany.

On the one hand, this study evaluates results of literature research in national studies and articles and, on the other hand, results of a survey with questionnaires on this topic in the individual countries. This survey and research were initially carried out only in the transnational AIM partner countries Italy, Austria and Spain with the support of the local partner organizations. In a second step Switzerland and Belgium were additionally integrated into the study since networking and the job description there are relatively far advanced at the national level and developments in the field of language and cultural mediation in these countries are, so to speak, trailblazing for national development of the job description in Germany. The section on Germany, by contrast, is based on experiences of the SpraKuM project in Wuppertal and on results of their national study on the demand for language and cultural mediation in the social services and health care sector.

The present study conveys only an insight into the situation of language and cultural mediation in the various countries and makes no claim to completeness. That would require an additional comprehensive study in a European context and thus necessitate more extensive human resources and financial support also at the national level. In this summary of the study, information has been compiled on the commonly used definitions, the needs and existing studies,

application areas, training, networking and job description as well as employment and financing of language and cultural mediators in the respective countries. The complete study you can find on the website of the transnational partnership AIM ([www.equal-tca-aim.com](http://www.equal-tca-aim.com)) under the button “products”.

### 3. Definitions

There are different definitions and concepts regarding the precise meaning of language and cultural mediation in the countries examined within the framework of this study. Clearly defined and standardized job titles with a clear description of the duties exist at the national level primarily in the countries where development of the job description and standardization of training is relatively far advanced, such as in Switzerland and Belgium.

In Germany alone a large number of terms have been used to date (language and cultural mediators, community interpreters and integration assistants) and now they are to be combined into a standard government-recognized job description, i.e. so-called language and integration mediation. The relevant designation in Switzerland is “intercultural translation”, in Austria “community interpreting”, in Belgium “social interpreting” (“l’interprétariat en milieu social” / “sociaal tolken”), in Italy “cultural mediators” (“mediatore culturale”) and in Spain “intercultural translation” (“traducion y interpretación en los servicios públicos”). The related job description can be generally summarized as follows: mediation at the language and sociocultural level to support communication between people with a migration background and the qualified staff of the institutions in the field of health care, education and social services.

In some of the countries listed here, e.g. Switzerland, Belgium and Spain, the job title intercultural mediation (“médiacion intercultural”) is additionally used with a range of duties that goes far beyond the functions of language mediation or almost completely disregards them. Intercultural mediation is viewed more as prevention through information and explanation and mediation in the case of conflicts, taking into account intercultural aspects. In Belgium, for example, intercultural mediators are employed especially in hospitals and in Spain at public service institutions in communities greatly characterized by immigration.

In Switzerland, where the job description is differentiated most clearly (based on the three (in English only two) different definitions of intercultural translation, intercultural mediation (interkulturelle Vermittlung) and intercultural mediation. Intercultural mediators (“interkulturelle VermittlerInnen”) perform this role while intercultural mediation (“interkulturelle Mediation”) refers solely to conflict mediation in an intercultural context, such as in connection with divorces or neighborhood conflicts.

However, a clear description of the duties of language and cultural mediation and recognition of the profession as a clearly defined job description at the national level is a major goal for all countries so as to promote the quality and application of language mediation in practice and not to overtax the mediators in the performance of their work as well as guarantee their success.

### 4. Acquisition of needs and studies

Language and cultural mediation is very complex and helpful and though this is frequently confirmed in practice, it has not been demonstrated and researched on a scientific basis to any significant extent thus far. Although predominantly practical experience has been gained to date in the countries looked at here, no extensive studies have been conducted, but rather isolated regional studies or practice-oriented evaluation studies in connection with projects. Furthermore,

research primarily focuses on the health care sector.

The comprehensive study in Canada mentioned in the introduction verified for the first time in 2001 that compared to the majority society ethnic minorities received health care of poorer quality than members of the majority society, a fact that certainly applies to other countries, too.

For the most part project-based evaluation has been carried out in Germany thus far, but recently a survey was conducted within the scope of establishing the job description in the federal states of Berlin, Hessen and North Rhine-Westphalia for the purpose of determining the needs for language and integration mediators and the opportunities for financing their employment. The results of this national study will be published soon by the project SpraKum in Wuppertal under the website [www.transKom.info](http://www.transKom.info).

Studies in the field of intercultural translation in Switzerland showed that intercultural misunderstandings lead to diagnostic errors and faulty treatment in the health care sector (Bischoff and Loutan 2000), and in the field of social services and education, too, such misunderstandings occur with the corresponding effects. Discrimination against immigrants in the health care system and the employment of nonprofessional interpreters (so-called ad hoc interpreters), in particular children, were also perceived as a problem in a study within the framework of the Immigrant-Friendly Hospitals project from 2002-2007. For this reason employment of intercultural interpreters is recommended as a contribution to improving social and health care for immigrants.

In the field of intercultural mediation in the health care sector in Belgium a supporting evaluation study examined and underlined the importance of employing intercultural mediators in practice as support for qualified clinic staff. Another study in the health care sector (Hertog/van Gucht) verified, furthermore, that language mediation in the health care sector plays a key role in the quality of the service and in connection with cost savings in care. The national umbrella organization COFETIS-FOSOVET is currently examining this phenomenon, applied to the sociocultural sector.

Up to now Italy and Austria have predominantly conducted regional studies: in Italy mainly in the field of public services and in Austria in the health care sector. In Spain, too, research is still in its infancy. However, there is a relatively up-to-date overview of activities carried out within the scope of national studies and research, dating from 2007 and compiled by the COMUNICA research group of the University of Alcalá.

In summary it can be said with respect to language and cultural mediation needs that everyone in certain situations should have the right to linguistic support and appropriate communication of information, especially when serious decisions having a bearing on physical integrity, health or even asylum proceedings are involved. Particularly with an eye to administrative simplification and avoidance of additional costs due to misunderstandings in the treatment of illnesses or in asylum proceedings and in connection with integration, it can only be in the interest of the respective government agencies and thus the individual countries if language mediators are employed in such situations.

Since language and cultural mediation work and the need for it have been subject to little research to date and the former is still in the development phase, however, a further, and in this case more comprehensive study on the need for and benefits of language and cultural mediation and a resulting comparison at the European level are necessary according to the experience with the present study.

## 5. Application areas

The “clients” who are supported by language and cultural mediators are, for the most part, members of minorities in the respective host country (immigrants, asylum seekers, foreign workers, refugees, etc.) and qualified employees, i.e. representatives of service institutions like government agencies and institutions that have to communicate with clients who speak a foreign language – and therefore rely on language and cultural communication assistance.

Often an unequal language proficiency level as well as an unequal knowledge, education and experience horizon exist between the two groups. Moreover, other communication disruptions frequently occur during communication due to heterogeneous patterns of thought, value and norm systems. Language and cultural mediators are links or bridges between the two parties involved and their job is to balance the asymmetric power divide between the parties and contribute to elimination of language and cultural barriers.

Primarily interpreting “on site” is meant when reference is made to forms of language and cultural mediation. In Italy, Switzerland and Belgium, however, telephone interpreting or also written translation, especially in connection with important documents, is additionally mentioned under certain circumstances, such as in the case of short talks, standardized procedures or cases of emergency.

The classic application areas for language and cultural mediators in the countries described are for the most part in the health care, social services and educational sector. In some countries like Austria and Switzerland the health care sector, e.g. general or psychiatric clinics and therapeutic facilities, dominates among the researched fields in which language and cultural mediators are employed. In the other countries like Italy and Spain it is not so much the health care sector, but predominantly the education and social welfare system and institutions dealing with immigrants, such as public and municipal authorities and services, that are mentioned.

In Germany the following are mentioned as examples of health care institutions that employ language and cultural mediators:

- general hospitals and their medical and nursing services
- psychiatric clinics and therapeutic facilities
- rehabilitation facilities
- doctor’s offices
- psychosocial centers
- public health services, health departments and health care counseling offices (Aids counseling, nutrition counseling)

For the field of social welfare the following are mentioned as examples:

- counseling offices of the municipalities and private institutions, especially for immigrants (immigration counseling, divorce counseling, debtor counseling, educational guidance)
- government agencies and departments (youth welfare department, social services department, aliens department, housing department, employment office)
- town district work
- schools and day care centers
- child and youth welfare institutions (outpatient and inpatient)
- care for elderly and disabled persons



In Belgium social interpreters work in all such institutions while intercultural mediators are employed especially in hospitals, though their field of work, as already mentioned in the point “Definitions”, goes beyond interpreting and cultural mediation and focuses on health education, providing patients with information as well as emotional and general support, conflict mediation in the event of problems and support in the case of discrimination. In addition, social interpreters are often called on for language support as needed. The duties of intercultural mediators in Spain are described likewise. They are employed in city districts with a high proportion of immigrants to provide information on services at public education or counseling institutions and thus contribute to preventing conflicts and misunderstandings.

Language and cultural mediators view their own work as involving certain positive and negative aspects. Among the positive aspects perceived is the fact that they can help other immigrants and support them in connection with difficulties and language problems. The intercultural exchange and process of creating understanding as well as the trust and recognition received are also seen as a boon. However, it is perceived as very hard in some situations to overcome language and understanding difficulties and deal with prejudices, for example, as well as to remain impartial and disassociate oneself from the problems of the immigrants. Another obstacle is that language and cultural mediators can only communicate and mediate and have to accept the fact that they have no authority to make decisions. The low status and little recognition of the profession are additionally mentioned as negative aspects.

## **6. Training**

Like interpreters, language and cultural mediators have to possess a basic repertoire of specialized competence. This includes language competence in the source and target language, terminological familiarity and transfer competence, etc. However, language and cultural mediators are also confronted with non-linguistic and cultural influencing factors, requiring additional social, cultural and psychosocial background knowledge and related skills going beyond the traditionally necessary competencies. These competencies have to be developed and imparted, inter alia, through personal and practical experience and appropriate training.

In Switzerland and Belgium, where development of the job description is far advanced, this is attributable in particular to the standardization and thus quality assurance of training at the national or regional level.

The existing curricula at the local, regional and national level as well as the length and number of training programs in the individual countries are relatively diverse. On the one hand, there are training courses conducted by NGO institutions for one or more days while other programs last several months and some are offered within the framework of advanced courses of study. In connection with training for language and cultural mediators, therefore, the question arises as to whether merely a shorter or longer further training course based on an occupation is required or formal vocational training or academic studies are needed to acquire appropriate qualifications. Nationally this may be viewed differently.

In Switzerland a clear job description for “intercultural translation” and uniform standardized training now exist at the national level. The process of government recognition, however, has yet to be completed. Since 2004 national training standards have applied to the specific vocational training offered by 11 recognized institutions in Switzerland. The training ends with a certificate issued by INTERPRET, the national umbrella organization for language mediation work. In addition to training, the 2 modules with a total of 120 hours of seminars, 110 hours of private study and 6-8 hours of group supervision, the requirements for obtaining the certificate include 50

hours of practical experience and command of the local and interpreting language.

The focal points of the training are intercultural communication and conflicts, reflection on one's own intercultural characteristics and immigration experience, conducting talks and understanding of one's role, text comprehension and communication of information as well as the basic principles of the health care, social welfare and education system and dealing with government agencies. A case in practice is documented or training work is performed at the end of each module. However, national standards and uniform training content do not exist yet for the other task involved in this field of work, intercultural mediation ("interkulturelle Vermittlung" und "interkulturelle Mediation").

In Belgium there are no standardized national training programs for the field of "intercultural mediation" in hospitals, but only national standards as a requirement for employment or performance of this work. In addition, training courses and supervision for intercultural mediators are offered by various institutions parallel to employment. A standard training curriculum for the field of "social interpreting" (since back in 1991) exists only in the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium while for the French-speaking section the training profile along with the job description are still in the development phase, inter alia under the direction of the national umbrella organization, COFETIS-FOSOVET.

In terms of standardization, the situation in the other countries involved in the study is not so far advanced. In Germany there are predominantly isolated project-based initial and further training programs spread across the country. In 2005, within the framework of the EQUAL European initiative, three institutions joined forces in Germany with the participation of the SpraKum project in Wuppertal in order to develop standardized further training (18-month basic module and 6-month advanced module) aimed at ensuring uniform quality and university entrance qualification. Plans call for provision of this training in future also as government recognized vocational training. However, there is still a long way to go until then.

"Community interpreter training" in Austria is also in its infancy and the training scene there is just as "scattered" and project-based as in Germany. From 2004 to 2006, on the other hand, a university course of study in "community interpreting" was conducted in Graz as high-quality academic training ending with a recognized university degree. It was not possible to continue it, however, due to lack of financing.

The situation is similar in Spain, where in some cases training is offered at the university level not in classic interpreting, but in "intercultural translation and interpreting", such as at the University of Alcalá in Madrid or at the University of Salamanca and Valladolid, which even end with a master's degree. Moreover, there are several postgraduate courses of study or courses for translation and interpreting. On the other hand, there are also project-based training programs in "intercultural mediation", e.g. within the framework of the SEMSI project, in cooperation with the free university in Madrid, though it requires completion of a course of study.

Since only regional recognition of vocational training is required to become automatically valid at the national level in Italy, there are a large number of similar but varying regional training curricula for so-called "cultural mediators" there, too. Again, however, no uniform standards exist for the entire country. Launched as projects by NGOs in the 1990s, there are many nonacademic training courses, but they do not lead to an academic degree and are primarily offered to immigrants or are attended by them. Some university courses of study have even been set up in Italy since the university reform in 2002. The problem with them is that they are predominantly attended by native Italians because of their entrance requirements, a fact that is criticized in the practical field due to their lack of a migration background.

Besides the question of whether training should be carried out at an academic or nonacademic level, another point of debate in the individual countries is how to draw up admission prerequisites and training requirements so the courses are also accessible to immigrants, who frequently lack the corresponding study certificates or vocational training recognized in the country. Furthermore, there is the question of how much occupational practice is necessary in addition to qualified training and whether immigrants and native citizens are equally suitable or what type of immigration or sociocultural experience is necessary for qualified performance of the work.

## 7. Networking and job description

The status of the development of training standards for language and cultural mediation in the individual countries is almost comparable to the status of the national development of a job description since the two topics are linked to each other. For an official acknowledgement of language and culture mediation as a standardized job description on national level, a good national networking of institutions, a standardized national training program and legislative substructures are a precondition.

In Germany, as already mentioned in the point on Training, three institutions recently launched a joint initiative for recognition of the new job description for “language and integration mediators”. The experience of the other countries and the opportunities opened up by Europe-wide networking via the national umbrella organizations and networks are helpful here.

As in Germany, development of the job description in Austria is also in a relatively early stage. There are various efforts to obtain permanent funding and to structure training and employment particularly in the health care sector, though success thus has taken place predominantly at the regional rather than the national level.

To date regional sovereignty in Italy has resulted in the development of varying regional training standards and practices. Recognition of the job description, like accreditation of training in Italy, also takes place at the regional level. In the new immigration law of 1998 cultural mediation was designated as an important element for social integration of newly immigrated citizens at the national level in Italy. Since then the already lively practice at the regional and local level has received even more recognition, demand and financial support. After implementation of the law a working group was established at the national level to work up a national recommendation for cultural mediation for the regional governments.

In Spain the COMUNICA research group of the University of Alcalá in Madrid was established in 2005 to boost research and efforts for a separate job description in this field. Since 1999 the Trinagulo group, on the other hand, has been endeavoring to develop the occupational field of intercultural mediation and cooperation in public relations and training. A subject under debate there at the moment is whether intercultural mediation is an independent occupation or merely a supplementary qualification or cross-sectional task of specialized staff in the social services.

In Belgium the job description for “intercultural mediation” in hospitals is relatively well developed thanks to the legal stipulation of financing of a full-time position for each hospital, currently filled by employees at 55 clinics in the country altogether. The employees jointly work on improving quality and defining the job description more precisely within the framework of quality development of the mediator program, financed by the Health Department.

Networking by national umbrella organizations is relatively far advanced in Belgium as well as in Switzerland and therefore exemplary. COFETIS-FOSOVET is the national umbrella organization



in Belgium that aims for a standardized national job description for social translation and represents the interests of social translation and interpreting services and in which approx. 10 French-speaking and 9 Dutch-speaking local and regional placement agencies of social interpreting services are joined together. Official government recognition of the job description for social interpreting is targeted for 2009 since, as in Italy, regional recognition has to take place first and only then national recognition.

INTERPRET, the national umbrella organization for all actors in the field of intercultural translation in Switzerland, was established in 1999. Promotion of integration has been stipulated in national law since 1998. The umbrella organization is responsible for coordination in connection with recognition and standardization of training for intercultural translation and for public relations work aimed at recognition of a standard job description for intercultural translation. These efforts will soon culminate in official government recognition.

## **8. Employment and financing**

Official national recognition of the job description for language and cultural mediation requires a determination of needs on the part of the labor market and development of appropriate employment and financing models.

A uniform job description in Germany is aimed at standardizing the existing variety of procedures for payment of the services rendered, which range from working in an honorary capacity to permanent employment, in accordance with vocational training rates, thus providing a clearer picture for potential employers. Workshops conducted thus far with experts concerning establishment of the job description viewed working on a freelance basis as the main goal of later integration into the labor force. In addition, employment contracts can be set up in the form of a permanent position or working on call. The currently applicable rate for language and cultural mediators, integration assistants and community interpreters of € 25.00 a hour, plus reimbursement of traveling expenses incurred, is regarded as a starting point of negotiations for future language and integration mediators in Germany. The hourly rate is oriented to the quality of the training and the work and assumes that the various institutions that employ language and cultural mediators are able to finance it.

This diversity also exists in most other countries and the majority of the language and cultural mediators work on a freelance basis, some full time, some as a second job. In many cases assignments are arranged via local, regional or even national placement agencies, through which institutions can inquire about and book cultural mediators. Organized and central placement means above all customer orientation, guarantees the quality of the work, enables the creation of standard working conditions, standardizes the placement procedures and facilitates systematic evaluation and support of assignments.

National placement via the umbrella organizations, however, only takes place in Switzerland and Belgium. In Switzerland the 18 regional and local placement agencies are joined together in the umbrella organization INTERPRET, which also advertises via a joint website on the Internet enabling direct contact to the local placement agencies or the cultural mediators themselves. There is also cooperation between the placement agencies by means of systematic recording of assignments and client feedback. Through its website COFETIS-FOSOVET, the national umbrella organization of social translation and interpreting services in Belgium, also offers a central listing of its 10 French-speaking and 9 Dutch-speaking local, regional and federal placement agencies, which have to be contacted directly, however.

The assignments or at least the placement is not yet able to finance itself in most countries,

including Switzerland and Belgium, and like training is still co-financed in most cases through regional, federal or EU funds within the framework of projects.

In Switzerland, however, professionalization of the work through national networking has been achieved primarily by means of subsidizing the training and the local placement agencies by the Federal Office of Public Health and the Swiss Federal Commission for Foreigners. Furthermore, cantons and municipalities receive subsidies for employing intercultural translators. In addition to the social interpreters, who work at all institutions employing language and cultural mediators in Belgium on a freelance basis through the placement agencies, intercultural mediators are even employed as permanent staff members in many Belgian hospitals. This was made possible in 1999 by the legally established right to financing by the Ministry of Health.

In Germany training courses as such are currently still financed via the Equal initiative, the European Social Fund and the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. In future various funds are to ensure provision of training. Among other things, training shall be passed on to further training institutions and conducted there accordingly. The Employment Agency will be called in to negotiations as an additional source of financing. A combination of these options with funds from the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs is conceivable.

## 9. Outlook

As this study indicates, the duties, training and areas of work in the professional field of language and cultural mediation do not fundamentally differ from each other. However, there are differences in the professionalization and development of the occupation between Belgium, Switzerland, Spain, Italy and Germany. On the one hand, this is due to different socioeconomic conditions, but also to successful national networking. For this reason it will certainly be decisive in the future to promote an exchange at the international and European level, too, with the aim of learning from one another, discussing and jointly further developing standards, such in the training of language and cultural mediators. Only in this way can language and cultural mediation as a clearly developed job description contribute to improving the involvement of immigrants in everyday life and foster their integration.

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### Contact

Gabi Wolfgruber  
EQUAL EP TransKom- gesund und sozial  
Transnationale Partnerschaft A.I.M.  
Tel.: 0049-202-97 444 723 // 0049-202-496 970  
Email: [wolfgruber@migrationsdienst-wuppertal.de](mailto:wolfgruber@migrationsdienst-wuppertal.de)  
Internet: [www.equal-tca-aim.com](http://www.equal-tca-aim.com)