



A disabled duo steps out in style

Mobility Assured

Photo by Tian Xiaotong

The writer of this article, Les Charlton, is a below-knee amputee and thus familiar with Beijing Otto Bock Orthopaedic Industries Company, Limited, a Germany-based international prosthetics manufacturer. Its Greater China Headquarters was established in Beijing in 1993.

Countless physically disabled Chinese and the occasional foreigner working in China have much cause to be grateful for in Otto Bock's superb customised artificial limbs and its squad of expert prosthetists. Its highly trained men and women help people decide which type of arm, leg or appliance they need and take exacting measurements with all the adroitness of top tailors.

In fitting a finished product, their eagle eyes can spot the slightest potential problem that might affect a patient's comfort, putting it right with oft-tiny adjustments using precision tools. Below-knee amputees in particular often think of the process as akin to breaking in a new pair of shoes. They are genuinely surprised when, usually quite quickly during their daily doings, they actually forget they are wearing a prosthesis.

Curiously, despite their impressive qualifications, knowledge and experience, prosthetists are officially known as “technicians,” a seeming contradiction because they are also invariably excellent psychologists and more than acquainted with the workings of the human body.

There can be few professions more challenging, yet fulfilling, than prosthetics, a tongue-twister of a word that simply means the replacement of a person's missing bodily part with an artificial substitute, be it a leg, arm, hand, fingers/toes or even an eye. Some experts say false teeth qualify as prostheses, even if used only for cosmetic purposes to restore, perhaps, an entertainer's ravaged million-dollar smile.

Beijing's busy front-line Otto Bock HealthCare operation, along with its counterpart sales and service outlets in 36 countries and export activities in more than 140 parts of the world, make up an empire that is a world leader in specialized products for the disabled. Along with Beijing, which also has a production centre in Tongzhou, there are sales offices in Chengdu, Shanghai and Guangzhou. There is also an Otto Bock specialist rehabilitation centre in Wuhan for the more seriously disabled who have often lost one or more limbs.

All these facilities are part of a modern, hugely successful medical-technological company with a long tradition, in essence a global player with local roots. Currently its Greater China Managing Director is Bernard O'Keeffe (see sidebar, page 29).

Otto Bock as a whole operates under the motto “Quality for Life” and, in 2005, became the official worldwide partner of the International Paralympics Committee, amazing evidence of which will be under the public spotlight at the Paralympics that will follow the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. Although the world-wide partnership is comparatively recent, Otto Bock has supported the Paralympics since the early 1980s.

In Beijing, many competitors, including sprinters, runners and hurdlers, will be chasing medals by producing astonishingly fast times on Otto Bock artificial legs, while table-tennis and basketball players



Professional Services Director Georg Hoffman (left) and Professional Services CPO Ulrich Mueller



will be in the company's specially designed wheelchairs.

In the Beginning ...

Otto Bock, the company, is named after its German prosthetist founder; it was founded in Berlin in 1919 as the Orthopadische Industrie GmbH. Otto Bock himself had a pioneering spirit, much courage and notable decision-making skills. His new company was a success because it was able to supply thousands of Great War veterans with prostheses and orthopaedic products.

Sadly, the scope of the demand could not be met through traditional artisan methods, so—never to be outdone—Bock developed the idea of manufacturing prosthetic components in modular form (what today would be called mass production), delivering them directly to orthopaedic technicians on their sites in hospitals and clinics.

This smart, caring move by Otto Bock became the cornerstone of the world's orthopaedic industry.

Soon after its founding, the young company moved to Konigsee, Thuringia, Bock's home town. From the start, he continually tested new materials for their applicability in manufacturing processes, making him perhaps the leading forerunner in the use of aluminium parts, applying them to prosthetics as early as the 1930s.

In this he was onto a winner for it largely meant a progressive goodbye to heavy legs, and sometimes arms and hands, made from wood and leather. Many legs of those days were held on by leather laces which were tied much as with a boot. Before long, Bock's steadily expanding business was employing a staff of 600.

Then came World War II, three years after which (in 1948) the company suffered a severe blow. The entire private assets of the Bock family and the factory in Konigsee were expropriated without compensation as a shattered Germany struggled to get back onto its feet. Historians say these ruthless acquisitions were the beginning of the Cold War and Russia's Iron Curtain.

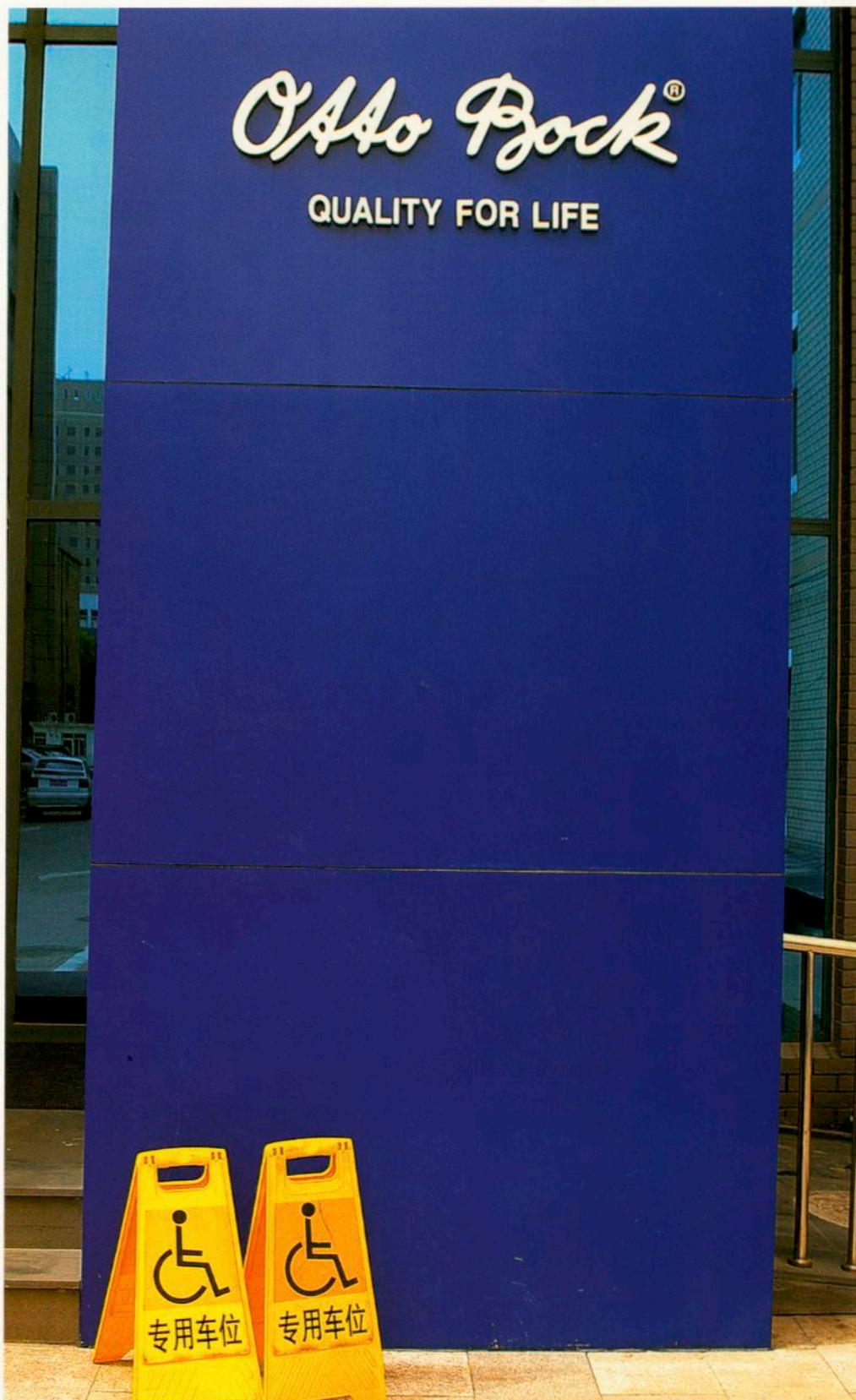
Stoic and determined as ever, Otto Bock contrived to start again, this time in the Lower-Saxony town of Duderstadt. Here his son-in-law, Dr. Max Nader, built a new production plant, no easy task when dogged by little money and lack of skilled labour and suitable materials. It was to Nader's credit that, like his father-in-law, he retained the company philosophy to remain on the lookout for new ideas and technologies.

Because the preferred poplar wood for prosthesis fabrication was by now increasingly scarce, Nader sought a replacement in the chemical industry. This was how, from 1950, the first plastics were applied to artificial limbs, some of which are still in use today. Excited by the vast potential of this then-new material, Nader founded the Otto Bock Kunststoff Holding GmbH (kunststoff meaning plastic) in 1953.

Today this company is an important technology partner for Otto Bock HealthCare as well as a successful developer and supplier of plastics destined, for example, for the automobile industry. The third pillar for the Otto Bock group is Sycor GmbH, formerly part of an Otto Bock computer department. This information and communications technology firm develops customized solutions for company networks.

Dr. Nader proved to be just as active and far-seeing as founder Otto Bock himself, making international moves from the start. In 1958 he instigated the expansion of the company and founded Otto Bock US in Minneapolis. Now under the control of Professor Hans-Georg Nader, Dr. Nader's son, Otto Bock is the only true global player in the orthopaedic industry, and innovation remains its driving force and most important source of growth. Among milestone moves has been its development of myo-electric arm prostheses controlled by a patient's muscular signals.

Thus Otto Bock has changed from being the producer of individual components to a supplier of complete prosthetic systems. This writer, having of late been the grateful recipient of a snugly comfortable prosthetic lower leg, is delighted to find he is no longer "out on a limb," so to speak.





Perfectly in step, despite a disability

Mister Efficiency

Kingpin of Greater China's Otto Bock sales and service centres is managing director Bernard O'Keeffe, a certified prosthetist based in Asia since 1998 who spends much of his time visiting the various Otto Bock HealthCare centres under his charge to ensure that they continue to operate on nothing less than top-line.

He described the Otto Bock philosophy as "a continuation of family values introduced by our founder 88 years ago," adding that over the decades the firm has earned a high reputation for technical innovation in the prosthetics industry with the specific aim of making disabled people's lives easier.

"This is made possible through our use of quality products and the highest level of techniques," he said, "as with myoelectrics, whereby an arm amputee can make his dummy hand function to good effect, like picking up a mug of coffee or gripping and using a tool."

O'Keeffe agreed that Otto Bock's increasing strength and widening influence in China are at base a reflection of the country's commercial potential. "We think economic and other conditions in China are very attractive to us, allowing us to support the rapid growth of our industry."

"We don't see China as a place for cheap production. These days it's a country where we can, and already do, make a very positive contribution. With the support of the Chinese Government, we want to make our products as accessible as possible to the Chinese people, competing on the basis of quality rather than price."

As a service provider offering technical and other support to Chinese hospitals dealing with amputees, and to the likes of centres such as the Beijing Artificial Limbs Factory, Otto Bock is paving its way to becoming a valued partner in China's rehabilitation world. With nearly a century's experience and know-how, the company could prove a godsend to China's countless disabled folk, many of whom get around only on a locally-made, rudimentary prosthesis.

Along with providing first-class prosthetics training to its own staff, the company also gives much support to professionals throughout China, enabling the next generation of technicians to use Otto Bock's innovative products.