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7. European Health Forum Gastein 2004
*"Global challenges for health -
European approaches and responses"*



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**"Mental Health in Eastern Europe:
Safe-Keeping to Integration"**

Actual information and photos at
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Concerning mental health, things are, on several accounts, not looking as good in the Middle and Eastern European countries as in Western Europe: Due to the massive social changes, many people suffer from depression and disorders of anxiety, become addicted to drugs and alcohol or commit suicide. For decades, psychiatry was not involved in fundamental developments. Psychiatric patients have to, first, fight for their place in society. One of the main topics of the 7th European Health Forum Gastein focuses on "Mental Health". Special emphasis will be on the situation of mentally ill people in Eastern Europe.

Alarming rates of suicides in Eastern Europe

It is difficult to judge the mental condition of a nation. Figures of suicides are often its substitute. According to the WHO atlas of 2003, the mortality due to suicide and self-inflicted injuries reached a rate of 44 for every 100,000 inhabitants in Lithuania in 2001, the highest rate in the entire European region and four times higher than the EU average. Lithuania is an extreme example, but by far not the only one. "A severe struggle with the new situation can be observed among people in most of the Middle and Eastern European countries", explains Dainius Puras from the University of Vilnius, Lithuania, at the EHFG. After the breakdown of the old organization, a fast progress failed to occur. Many have to face bitter poverty. Men, in particular, cannot cope with the radical change of social norms and role models: "In certain countries the number of men committing suicide is five times as high as the number women", says Puras. Moreover, the existential uncertainty leads to a number of diseases caused by stress. A violent, risk taking behaviour and a self-destructive way of living trigger off a feeling of life anxiety and helplessness and often result in early death.

How Can We Help?

Mental diseases like depression are stigmatized even in many Western European countries. An overall attempt to keep the access to health services as low as possible should be made - with regard to costs, nearness and social acceptance. "If health services for people suffering from mental illnesses do not include the social context and the existing

resources, they are as good as useless” , says EHFG expert Rachel Jenkins, professor at King’s College, London. A policy following the slogan “Equal service for everyone“ fails its goal. A Lithuanian small farmer, who can, due to the EU enlargement, not support his family by traditional work, who does not fit into the classic male role model and therefore suffers from depression and alcoholism, needs support that goes exactly together with his needs as a man, a rural and a member of a small village community. This offer must not only be accessible but primarily acceptable.

Safe-keeping instead of Integration of the Mentally Ill

The psychiatric facilities in the former states of the Eastern bloc are still haunted by the past. “Although the new EU Member States have, in many fields, caught up enormously with the others, mental health is still given second-class treatment”, stresses David McDaid from the School of Economics & Political Science, London. There is a common consensus on the fact that neither the organisation of the services nor the treatments themselves are as good as the ones of Western Europe. „This is not astonishing if one considers that psychiatric homes and hospitals have long been used as administrative institutions or even as political reprisals for the opposition”, explains McDaid. The states of the former Eastern bloc have, for decades, been cut off international developments; access to technical journals, congresses or other forms of information exchange were not made possible.

Violation of Human Rights in Psychiatry

“Mentally ill people are in hospital to be cured, not to be punished “, underlined the parties’ representative Stefan Bandol from the Aripa Organisation, Rumania. In many psychiatric hospitals “difficult” patients are still “calmed down“ by electroshocks or an overdose of tranquilizers. “This way, patients too often become a vegetable without an own will“, criticises Bandol. McDaid, too, reports of intolerable conditions in a lot of Eastern European facilities: “In quite a few Hungarian homes the patients’ room to move is severely restricted, their privacy is not respected and the access to medicine is limited. The European Council has also scathed that the strictly forbidden cage-like beds are still used.“ The WHO estimates that worldwide 65 percent of beds are offered in psychiatric clinics where conditions are disastrous.

Not Many Resources for Mental Health

“Too little money is spent on this sector; education and further education of psychiatric personnel or social workers leave much to be desired. A great deal of success would be achieved simply if the cooperation between psychiatric facilities and other social services was better. Hungarian psychiatric clinics are overcrowded by a load of drug and alcohol addicts; through external offers of support the situation could be improved“, says Mc Daid.

Social Integration Is a Hard Road to Travel

“We were very optimistic that the situation for mentally ill people would improve only within a few years after the fall of the iron curtain, especially concerning the opening of psychiatric institutions and the social integration of patients. In the meantime, this optimism has vanished and the feeling that the reforms have gone wrong, dominates.“ New facilities with alternative health services for mentally ill are very rare; they only survived with the help of international organisations’ support. Despite a tense financial situation, traditional hospitals and homes have stabilized their position. The thought of integration is still too new to the general public. “The weak and the outsiders are hardly tolerated in Eastern Europe. In a socially difficult situation, they are more considered like scapegoats.”

Curse and Blessing of New Psychiatric Drugs

The international pharmaceutical industry, which now provides the new countries with new drugs, has a conflicting role. "It is a great success that innovative medicine for treating mental disorders is finally available in the East, too, but urgently needed psychosocial therapies will never be introduced in the former states of the Eastern bloc, if short resources are only used for tablets", explains Puras. The Lithuanian health system spends an average of two to three million euros on modern psychiatric drugs instead of taking all the costs for the psychiatric treatment of children and young people in the secondary and tertiary sector upon itself (overall costs: 1 million euros).