

Mental health problems require safe and professional treatment

Ljubljana, September 9, 2024 - In the run-up to World Suicide Prevention Day on September 10, many professional associations and healthcare institutions in Slovenia are warning that people with mental health problems need safe, holistic and, above all, high-quality treatment. They therefore emphasise that the draft regulation on psychotherapeutic and clinical psychotherapeutic activities prepared by the Ministry of Health, which was open for public consultation until the end of August, is inadequate and harms patients.

Although the suicide rate in Slovenia has generally decreased in recent decades, it is worrying that the suicide rate among young people remains high. According to the NIJZ, suicide is the second most common cause of death among young people between the ages of 15 and 29, just after accidents.

For this reason, health experts believe that adequate expertise, skills and accountability of all those involved in the treatment of children and young people with mental health disorders and problems is crucial to provide professional help to children, young people and their families.

"Factors that increase the risk of suicide include mental disorders and problems such as depression and anxiety, social isolation, loneliness and difficulties in interpersonal relationships. It is therefore crucial to provide children and adolescents with safe and professional treatment that can only be offered by appropriately trained professionals," emphasises Associate Prof. Dr. Maja Drobnič Radobuljac, specialist in child and adolescent psychiatry and President of the Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (ACAP). "It is worrying that the number of children and adolescents presenting to our outpatient clinics with mental health problems after previously receiving inadequate treatment outside the healthcare system is increasing."

Dr. Maja Drobnič Radobuljac points out that knowledge and the ability to make the right diagnoses in children and adolescents are crucial. "For example, 75% of mental disorders occur before the age of 25, and the clinical presentation is not typical. In addition, some physical illnesses such as brain tumours, brain inflammation, certain forms of epilepsy, endocrine disorders, etc. can present with symptoms of mental disorders for the first time during this developmental phase. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the professional who diagnoses patients with such symptoms also carries out the necessary differential diagnostic assessment and treatment so that any physical illnesses can be identified and the child or adolescent can be referred for appropriate treatment in good time."

The draft law undermines the quality of treatment and professionalism

The Ministry of Health's draft law on psychotherapeutic and clinical psychotherapeutic activities introduces the professions of 'clinical psychotherapist' and 'psychotherapist' without requiring prior medical training.

The proposal is therefore inappropriate and lacks a professional basis, warn health professionals who are confronted with the mental health problems of the population on a daily basis in their work. Lowering the required professional standards would jeopardise the treatment of people with mental disorders and suffering, they argue.

"The draft law, which offers quick but reckless solutions under the pretext of shortening waiting times, is dangerous and has serious consequences for patient healthcare, especially for the most vulnerable groups such as children and adolescents who need professionals at their side," emphasises Dr. Sana Čoderl Dobnik, clinical psychologist and president of the Slovenian Chamber of Clinical Psychologists.

The medical profession also believes that the draft law sets extremely low standards for additional training, with only a short period of additional training and limited observation of clinical work, which increases the likelihood of professional errors. "Psychotherapy is a complex treatment method and cannot be carried out by people without the necessary medical knowledge. This is professionally and ethically unacceptable and is akin to trying to train members of other professions through a few courses, postgraduate courses and so-called training courses to treat a physical illness that requires specialist treatment and can be life-threatening because there is a shortage of doctors."

Dr. Sana Dobnik Čoderl admits that waiting times are currently a challenge, as in the entire healthcare sector, but that the measures to reduce them will soon have an effect. "Currently, more than 120 psychologists and 45 child and adolescent psychiatrists are in the specialisation phase, which will contribute to faster and better treatment of children and adolescents with mental health problems. As envisaged in the National Mental Health Programme 2018-2028, there will be a quarter more specialists in clinical psychology and child and adolescent psychiatry as early as next year, and the number of trained specialists will double by 2028."

A clear distinction between treatment and counselling

The medical profession emphasises that the law should draw a clear line between who can and cannot be treated for mental disorders and suffering through psychotherapy.

"We believe that the law should draw a clear line between psychotherapy in healthcare and counselling outside of healthcare. And, of course, differentiate both from all approaches that do not fall into one of these two areas and are completely without scientific and demonstrable basis or effectiveness," says Dr. Sana Dobnik Čoderl, who represents the joint position of Slovenian child and adolescent psychiatrists, psychiatrists and clinical psychologists.

The medical profession also believes that counselling outside the healthcare system is an appropriate and necessary form of support for people in various life situations. However, it is important that the counsellor is able to make a professional judgement as to when the person being counselled needs to be brought under the umbrella of health care, i.e. treatment. "Psychotherapy is one of the working methods in clinical practise that deals with mental health disorders and distress. It is not omnipotent and cannot be used everywhere and with every patient in the same way, and above all, not every person needs it," adds Dr. Maja Drobnič Radobuljac.

Network of mental health centres for more accessible help

For the most vulnerable groups, especially children and adolescents, it is crucial that they have access to professional help provided by highly qualified health professionals trained to the highest standards. Improving access to expert care is also one of the main goals of the Mira programme of the National Institute of Public Health (NIPH).

As Dr. Rade Pribaković Brinovec, public health specialist, head of the Centre for the Management of Prevention and Health Promotion Programmes and head of the MIRA

programme at the NIPH, explains, there are currently 17 mental health centres for adults and 20 for children and adolescents throughout Slovenia. "These centres offer an approach based on professional guidelines and are an indispensable link for the timely provision of help, especially for young people. Maintaining high professional standards in the treatment of mental illness is crucial to prevent long-term consequences and provide quality support to all who need it," emphasises Pribakovič.

Raising public awareness of mental disorders and suffering is also extremely important to reduce stigma and encourage people to seek help in a timely manner. "When society is better informed, it is easier to recognise the signs of mental health problems and take timely action. Awareness also helps to create a supportive environment in which people can seek professional help more quickly," concludes Rade Pribakovič Brinovec.

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