



The Forgotten Children Closing Statement – World Health Organization



Ladies and Gentlemen,

First let me please thank EUFAMI for inviting the World Health Organization to this conference and to participate in the preparation. We welcome EUFAMI's initiative in taking up the highly important theme of children of parents with a mental illness.

Contributing to this conference is a great pleasure and a privilege for me, not only as representative of the World Health Organization, but also – if you allow me this personal remark – as a private person, being a carer for about 40 years now. I myself know very well what it means to “parent” the parent, and how much this experience forms the personality, our relationships, how much it impacts on decisions one takes for his or her life.

Looking back to the past two days I can say that we had a very productive and constructive time. We have heard about the necessity for early identification and prevention, about the importance of support in parenting-education for parents and the role of the extended family, child protection and raising awareness in society. We have also heard about solutions, examples of good practice, and this shows that there is hope, that we can protect the children and support the families.

The promotion of mental health, the prevention of developmental disorders and early intervention with those displaying signs or symptoms of mental health problems play vital roles in the enhancement of the mental health and wellbeing of children and families. Mental health services can play a key role in supporting the children by providing age appropriate information and involvement of children and young people in decision-making processes regarding care and support of family members.

All this is very much in line with WHO's position regarding the mental health and wellbeing of children as endorsed in the Mental Health Declaration and Action Plan for Europe, for example that

- Given their vulnerability and needs, children should be a high priority for activities related to the promotion of mental health and the prevention and care of mental health problems
- That the international rights of children are to be incorporated into mental health legislation
- That children as much as possible shall be included in decision-making processes.

In 2005 in Helsinki the Health Ministers of the 52 Member States committed themselves to

- offer targeted support and interventions sensitive to the life stages of people at risk, particularly the parenting and education of children and young people
- provide home-based educational interventions to help proactively to improve parenting skills, health behaviour and interaction between parents and children,
- but also to eliminate stigma and discrimination by increasing public awareness and empowering people at risk, empowering children and adolescents in ways appropriate to their age and development.

And I think this last point is at the base of all interventions and efforts and changes we are trying to make, the empowerment of the children and the families. Although family-focused interventions have been found to be effective for mental health service users and his or her children, both the general public and adult psychiatric services rarely acknowledge or intervene with the children and/or the family of the service user. This must be addressed in policies, in statements, in service guidelines and practices.

As you probably know WHO and the European Commission are working on empowerment in the partnership project on User Empowerment in Mental Health. I would like to take the opportunity to thank EUFAMI, and in particular Kevin Jones as representative, for his ongoing commitment and support to this project.



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Another point I would like to make is about human rights of children and mental health services.

The Helsinki Declaration and Action Plan also state that institutional approaches for the care of children that engender social exclusion and neglect should be restricted. This leads to another group of children which are one of the most vulnerable groups in our societies, children with intellectual disabilities.

In spite of some considerable improvements over recent decades, NGOs, professionals, and the media from all sides of Europe continue to report cases of institutional neglect, physical abuse, and the violation of their rights. Reliance on long-stay institutions stands at the heart of the problem in many countries, made worse by the underdevelopment of the support services needed to ensure an adequate quality of life in the community, and particularly the highest attainable standard of mental and physical health (the right to health). A shift in the focus of service provision is necessary.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe has therefore launched an initiative, co-funded by the Prime Minister's Office of Romania, and in cooperation with the governments of the Member States of the European Region, to agree a coordinated set of priorities and actions towards improving the health of children and young people with intellectual disabilities and ensuring their successful transition to adulthood.

A Declaration on Children with Intellectual Disabilities and their Families is being drafted and will be presented for endorsement at a High-level Conference which will be held in early summer 2010 in Bucharest, Romania.

Coming back to children with parents with a mental illness, we have heard during this conference a variety of recommendations for action. These recommendations and concrete action points are stipulated in the Declaration and Action Plan presented at this conference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The mental health and social wellbeing of children is the responsibility of many sectors; partnership and collaboration with and between NGOs and governments, parents, children and families and the wider community are key strategies in the provision of timely support and enhancement of health outcomes for children and their families.

I want to reaffirm the commitment of the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe and myself to continue providing support to the implementation of today's Declaration and Action Plan. I am also looking forward to continue our fruitful and friendly partnership with EUFAMI.

I am confident that together we will make a change for children with a parent with mental illness and for the families.

Thank you for your attention.