

Setting priority areas for WPA's new triennium

The WPA General Assembly held on October 16, 2020 elected the Association's new office bearers and approved the WPA Action Plan for the 2020-2023 triennium¹. This plan defines emerging needs and priorities for the work of the WPA from a worldwide perspective.

Looking at the global situation, only a minority of people with mental disorder receive any help or intervention for their mental health difficulties. There is, thus, an outstanding need to improve access to high quality mental health care in all countries and to support psychiatrists and other mental health professionals in their important roles as direct service providers, trainers, supporters of health care workers in primary and community health care systems, and policy makers.

The key goals of the WPA Action Plan 2020-2023 include: promoting psychiatry as a medical specialty in clinical, academic and research areas; emphasizing public mental health as a guiding principle; highlighting the specific role of psychiatrists in working with other professionals in health, public health, legal and social aspects of care; and ensuring the WPA's positive engagement with Member Societies and other components of the Association, mental health professionals and general health care workers².

The WPA Action Plan 2020-2023 also looks at targeted areas that need attention, with input from various components of the Association, during the next triennium. It will work within an international perspective focusing specifically on improving coverage of interventions to treat mental disorders, prevent these disorders and promote mental well-being, including through relevant training of mental health and other professionals. It will also build on the previous Action Plans to ensure continuity in the WPA's work^{3,4}. Focused attention will be given to public mental health; child, adolescent and youth mental health; comorbidities in mental health and developing partnerships for joint collaborative work in this area; strengthening partnerships with organizations working in the entire field of mental health; and

continuation and completion of previous WPA Action Plans.

The public health population approach to mental health is particularly important to reduce the global burden of mental disorders, along with an emphasis on positive mental well-being⁵. Improving coverage of effective interventions to treat mental disorders; prominent coverage of child and adolescent mental health, including for higher-risk groups such as those with learning disability, autism, early onset of psychosis; addressing comorbidities in mental health care and training; capacity building and engagement with other mental health professionals are other salient features of this aspiring plan.

All the areas covered in the proposed Action Plan are of high priority. However, due to time limitations and scarcity of resources, there will be greater focus on specific areas. The WPA has established working groups that have started formulating plans and pilot projects in different areas outlined in the document. Once the findings of these pilot projects are available, we will share these reports and seek funding to implement these ideas in different settings and countries. It is hoped that the reports of these groups will set updated directions for all WPA components to develop further guiding principles and strategies for future work⁶⁻⁸.

The WPA is mindful that the rapid spread of COVID-19 infection around the world is further increasing risk of developing mental disorders, relapse of existing mental disorders and poor mental well-being, which requires action at a population level⁹. The current coronavirus pandemic has changed the world as we knew it. Unlike many pandemics, COVID-19 has not only affected the health sector, but has had several implications for the social and financial sectors as well. Looking at the health implications, there is no group that is immune to this infection, but there are more significant concerns for vulnerable populations, including persons with severe mental illness¹⁰. The mental health field is significantly hit by this pandemic and in many ways it is at the frontline in

addressing emotional and social aspects of this scourge¹¹⁻¹³.

Most mental health services are under-resourced and unfortunately under-prepared to cope with this pandemic. There is a dire need to use this lesson to reform our health and care services substantially¹⁴. Furthermore, response to COVID-19 is involving a prominent attention to the establishment of telehealth as an integral component of our future services. Psychiatry is still waiting for standards guiding the implementation of this component. The WPA plans to establish a working group to look at such opportunities and produce guidelines for online mental health services¹⁵.

It is hoped that the WPA Action Plan 2020-2023 will generate interest among all WPA components to develop further strategies for future work. The WPA is optimistic that it will receive support, active input, and advice from its membership in addressing these priorities and making a real difference in mental health.

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