
New Challenges for Mental Health in Public Health

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Mental health is a new priority in public health of the new millennium. Epidemiologic data draw our attention to the growing number of morbidity due to mental illness such as depression or anxiety disorders (Kessler 2000). Mental health problems affect morbidity and disability rates of a population and indirectly, death rates as well. Quality of life measures indicate that mentally ill people have a serious decline in their quality of life involving all domains from social relationships or work capacities to the broader involvement in community life (Heinz 1997). In addition, mental health problems, such as depression, may contribute to the development of non-psychiatric disorders. For example, it has become a scientific evidence that depression is an independent risk factor for coronary heart disease (Rugulies 2002). Thus, morbidity and mortality data are heavily influenced by mental health problems, both directly and indirectly.

Mental health prevention should get priority in public health. More public health research is needed to understand the socio-demographic, socioeconomic and sociocultural background of mental disease epidemiology. For example, social inequalities in health contribute significantly to the morbidity and mortality picture in society. However, we know less about the role that social inequalities play in mental health problems (Muntaner et al. 2000). Another challenge is to make cross-national comparisons in psychiatric epidemiology. The cultural issues may contribute to many problems in such comparisons, for example, the issue of validity (WHO 2000). Further research is needed to develop international indicators and a research methods pool in public health. Mapping this background may elevate the efficiency of mental health prevention.

Taking mental health into account is particularly a challenge in case of adolescent public health. Adolescence is an important developmental period characterized by many biological and psychosocial challenges which may contribute to mental health problems at this age. Although these problems do not

necessarily combine with later adult psychopathological disturbances, we should pay careful attention to the amount and intensity of them at an early age which may become problematic and develop into serious mental health consequences in adulthood. Therefore, psychiatric epidemiological studies should be focused on mapping psychosocial risk and protective factors of adolescents' mental health problems which may prove to be useful in mental health prevention Piko et al. 2005). Adolescence is the period when depressive symptoms begin to increase and it is the period of experimentation with drugs and other risk-taking behaviors. A possible explanation for gender, age or other sociodemographic variations in adolescent depression might be the different structure of risk and protective factors to which adolescents from different backgrounds are exposed (Piko & Fitzpatrick 2003).

Attitudes towards mental illness are always influenced by societal issues such as the actual scientific knowledge and public opinion, and the general world view of life, health and illness. Due to an increase in mental health problems and the development of psychiatric diagnosis and treatment, there is a slow change in the attitudes towards mental illness and psychiatric care. In this change, public health should play an important role with informing society about the latest scientific issues in the field of mental health. Since theories and practices in public health are based on an integrative, biopsychosocial approach to medicine, mental health in public health helps to find a balance between psychosocial and biological aspects of psychiatry (Clare 1999). Attitude formation in the field of mental health should be an integrated part of public health.

Mental health in public health is a special challenge in the region of Eastern Europe where research into psychosocial health is only recently becoming an issue. During the socialist period before 1989, training in public health and behavioral sciences in medical schools did not receive priority. Today, the links between behavioral sciences and public health are

increasing, however, the ongoing health care reforms (which often means financial reduction) make it difficult to introduce new developments in both psychiatry and public health.

All in all, mental health is an important field within public health and the importance should be growing in the future. Many aspects of mental health problems should involve a public health approach, for example, psychiatric epidemiology, public attitude formation, mental health prevention, ma-

nagement of psychiatric care, etc. Both theory and practice. We should think of prevention as early as adolescence when mental health problems begin to emerge in a greater amount. The frequency of mental illness continuously tends to increase but are we able to handle the public health consequences of this change? This is a great challenge for the population of modern society and public health should play a decisive role in the reply to this challenge.

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