

EDITORIAL

SAMI PIRKOLA

THE BROAD, COLLABORATIVE NEW MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY IN FINLAND

In the spirit of better steering and continuity of all mental health work, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in Finland published and launched a new National Mental Health Strategy in February 2020. It was prepared by an expert task group, nominated by previous Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services, Annika Saarikko, in the time period between 10.8.2018 – 31.12.2019. The final strategy was officially delivered to the next Minister Krista Kiuru, and its implementation has now started on behalf of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare and the joint municipalities expected to form the social and healthcare regions in the future.

The Finnish National Mental Health Strategy is a major statement by the Ministry, and the whole government, of the importance of mental health for all our well-being, functioning and quality of life. In the assignment, the expert group was ordered to draft a long-term strategic programme for the purpose of managing and steering mental health policy and actions for years and governments to come.

The drafting process proceeded with meetings, thorough discussions, facilitated seminars, and finally, a particularly careful audition by all possible stakeholders, followed by a feedback-based review. The atmosphere of the task group was positive and clearly committed to the set goals. Much attention was paid to taking external opinions into account when presenting the preliminary work to third parties or collaborators.

As a result, a concise strategy and attached suicide prevention programme is now taking place. The strategy consists of five focus areas: 1) mental health as capital, 2) building the mental health of children and young people, 3) mental health rights, 4) appropriate and extensive services and 5) good mental health management. The focus areas complement each other in forming a comprehensive matrix of principles and actions for the use of policy making. Each focus area includes a set of diverse actions guided by the focus. When looking at services, the strategy emphasizes collaboration and the needs of the patient.

A cross-cutting theme in the strategy is the importance of mental health in all areas of individual, social and societal life, regarding both the positive and negative dimensions of mental health. Actions are proposed for educating people in varying professional positions in mental health skills. Mental health is seen as a resource, as well as for those in need of psychosocial support.

The many actions planned, based on the Mental Health Strategy, will be carried on within Finland's current Health and Social Services reform. Initially, the implementation programme for the reform will set out to strengthen the availability of psychotherapies and psychosocial treatments, as well as both preventive and curative interventions in primary care, for all age groups. An important focus or idea to turn into reality is the structural and collaborative integration of primary and secondary care, for the purpose of better recognition and treatment of disorders.

In addition to the five focus areas, the National Mental Health Strategy involves a wide variety of proposed multisectoral activity. It seems that, despite the exceptional societal situation created by the COVID pandemic, many of the planned actions have already started to take place both at governmental level, and consequently at service development level.

We should be happy about this comprehensive statement of the importance of mental health. At the same time, we need to be active in demanding action in the form of implementation and follow-up of the strategy. The most important indication of the mental health strategy is the commitment of all levels of operators and stakeholders to the targets of the policy plan. The role of mental health in the well-being and functioning of us all has now been largely accepted. On the other hand, the importance of psychiatric care is recognized, as well as the rights of those who may need protection due to mental health problems. At this point, the strategy appears to be balanced and long-lasting in nature, but only time will tell whether it is effective in reaching its value-based objectives. This will need additional commitment and concrete action from actors that have not yet contributed to its production.

Sami Pirkola, MD, PhD
Professor of Social Psychiatry
Tampere University, Health Sciences
Vice-dean research for the Faculty of Social Sciences

Arvo Ylpön katu 34 (Arvo 1)
33014 Tampere University
Tel: +358-50-3187267