

Position Paper Regarding Mental Health

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1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” (1) Whereas mental health is therefore an integral part of the definition of ‘health’ as given by the WHO, services and care that directly address mental health are a domain in health care that is seriously neglected worldwide to this day. (2)

2. Call to Action

The swimsa demands the implementation of efficient strategies, which promote mental health and destigmatize mental disorders.

The swimsa acknowledges that...

1. ... the prevalence of mental disorders is high amongst the Swiss population, especially amongst vulnerable groups of the population.
2. ... medical students are a vulnerable group of the population.
3. ... educational institutions, hospitals, and the government are responsible for active engagement with issues pertaining to mental health and the drawing up and implementation of strategies.
4. ...the promotion of research and monitoring of mental health are needed.

The swimsa demands...

...of universities, especially of the medical faculties, that...

1. ... they accept their role and contribute their part to problem solutions for their students.
2. ... they provide easily approachable, confidential, and efficient support services for the mental health of all their students.
3. ... they implement an assessment system that operates without the utilization of grades, through which assessments can only be rated as a “pass” or a “fail,” additional to secondary informative feedback that takes another form.
4. ... practical training about “self care” is introduced to the curriculum of medical studies, which is adapted to the individual needs of students.

5. ... a plethora of support offers regarding the promotion of mental health for students is established, whose thematic subject matter includes career planning, social support, and legal counsel, while simultaneously securing the accessibility and transparency of said offers.
6. ... the curriculum is adjusted and the methods of teaching and available assessment systems that provenly have the least negative impact on students' mental health are promoted.
7. ... studies must be conducted and that research regarding mental health in Switzerland needs to be intensified.

... of the medical faculties that...

1. ... they lead by example through their management and promotion of the mental health of their students.

... of the hospitals and service providers that...

1. ... professionals are educated and trained in the necessary knowledge and skills to enhance the domain of mental health based on human rights and scientific findings.
2. ... corresponding working conditions and environments are created that secure and promote the mental health of the workforce.
3. ... they accept their role in the coping processes stemming from mental health issues suffered by their hospital staff.
4. ... the administrative efforts of the clinic are reduced, potentially through the employment of an external secretariat or the adjustment of software programs.

... of the federal government that...

1. ... the compliance with goal 3.4 of the goals for sustainable development (SDGs) of the United Nations until the year 2030 is guaranteed. (The goal is to reduce by one third the premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being)
2. ... the national capacity for the provision of information and research systems in the domain of mental health is increased and solidified.
3. ... a multi-disciplinary solution for mental health is found that includes the cooperation of public sectors like the health, educational, occupational, social, and other relevant sectors with the private sector.
4. ... the provision of financial means for mental health services and psychiatric research, especially for the most vulnerable groups of the population, including juveniles and adolescents, is guaranteed.

The swimsa endeavors to...:

1. ... constitute the vanguard in the promotion of mental health and the prevention of mental disorders through sensitization campaigns.
2. ... cooperate with the universities to improve the available information and education regarding mental health and mental disorders.
3. ... support the founding or improvement of mental health services at the medical faculties.

3. Main Text

According to the Swiss Health Observatory (OBSAN), 17% of the Swiss population suffers from a single or multiple disorders that are at varying stages of advancement and are linked to mental health. The aggravation of moderate symptoms of depression to severe symptoms accounted for 8.6% in 2017, which shows a rising trend in comparison to the 6.5% in 2012. With 11.3%, the age group of 15-34 year olds was the most afflicted. In 2016 the suicide rate in Switzerland amounted to 12.6 cases per 100'000 citizens. (3)

As a result of the rapid rise in noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) in Switzerland, under which mental illnesses are subsumed, the 'Dialog Nationale Gesundheitspolitik' developed a national strategy for the prevention of NCDs in 2016, after having published a report titled "Psychische Gesundheit in der Schweiz" in 2014. Said report emphasizes the necessity for action through the implementation of a diverse array of sensitization campaigns, which include the proliferation of research findings, destigmatization, prevention, and provision of structures and resources. (4)

It was proven that students suffer from depression, anxiety, and burnouts at a higher rate than their age peers. (5) Universities are an environment, in which adolescents and young adults see themselves confronted with a diverse set of social, emotional, and academic challenges that represent an additional stressor for their mental health. In addition to the transitional challenges that members of this age group experience (e.g. moving out of the parental home, managing one's own household, increasing responsibility for one's livelihood), performance requirements at universities are a further stressor for students that can negatively affect mental health. Specifically, the academic setting requires increased self-responsibility and the assumption of new roles, while exerting extra pressure on students, through its less stringent and different structures, in contrast to middle and high schools. (6) There are numerous studies that show medical students to be affected at a higher rate than others. According to a

meta-analysis that incorporated 183 studies originating out of 43 countries (upwards of 122'000 students), the rate of symptoms of depression being shown by medical students is 27%. (7)

Despite the prevalence of mental disorders, the stigmatization of afflicted individuals is still profound. It has been proven that this stigmatization leads to a delayed onset of seeking help, which entails negative consequences for the everyday life of the afflicted individual. (8) In the case of medical students, sociocultural, personal, and professional factors exacerbate the aforementioned stigmatization and further problematize the seeking of help for the afflicted. This can be attributed to the elevated social status that their future profession carries, denial and repression of emotions, and the tendency to react more empathetically to the needs of their patients than their own. (9)

There is a correlation between the implemented structures in education and training of students and their well-being, which is dependent on the assessment system in place. A study shows that assessment systems reliant on “pass” and “fail” options instead of grades influence students’ mental health positively. Upon the alteration of the assessment system, researchers found a significant improvement in psychological factors like anxiety, depression, well-being, vitality, and general health of students. This study also finds that said alteration of the assessment system does neither negatively impact academic performance nor the participation in lectures and clinical courses. Students reported that the quality of their academic studies and their personal lives had increased and one specific student went as far as stating in the corresponding questionnaire that his levels of stress were directly affected without causing drops in his performance at work. (10)

A study published in October 2019 about medical students that aim to become general practitioners and previously trained general practitioners highlights that assistant physicians are at an increased risk of severe stress and burnouts. The situation of assistant physicians is apparently comparable to the one medical students face. Additionally, the study shows that, from a global perspective, stress levels only seem to diminish after the acclimatization period for the profession of medical doctor has passed. (11) According to the president of the Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences (SAMW), a fifth of all graduates of medical studies temporarily or permanently stop working in their respective field. (12) The lack of medical doctors, which is looming in the future, is a vital aspect for the swimsa and its goal to secure the quality and future of medical studies. (13) A study published by the Swiss Medical Association (FMH)

reports that medical doctors at hospitals spend only one third of their working hours with their patients. (14) Since August 2017, the Swiss Association of Assistant Physicians and Senior Physicians (VSAO) has been conducting a sensitization campaign regarding the issue. The VSAO has also come up with constructive and specific solutions that alleviate the increase of administrative expenses, namely the employment of external secretariats and the adjustment of the used computer software. (15)

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