
ŠSSFD Position paper: "The Role of Pharmacists in Mental Health - Raising Awareness and Striving Towards Better Health Care."

The Students' section of the Slovenian Pharmaceutical Society (ŠSSFD) is the national association that represents over 950 pharmacy, laboratory biomedicine, cosmetic science and industrial pharmacy students in Slovenia. ŠSSFD is aware of the growing burden of mental disorders with significant impacts on health, major social and human rights consequences in all countries of the world.

Many variable factors, such as biological and social determinants (e.g. poverty, exclusion and different forms of inequality) have been proven to increase the risk of poor mental health. Therefore, all the aforementioned factors should be taken into consideration when aiming to improve general mental health. Common mental health disorders in Slovenia are stress, anxiety, depression and prominent public health problems, such as suicide and harmful use of alcohol. The highest prevalence of work-related stress is in Central Slovenia, mainly because of a faster, more work-oriented lifestyle. The suicide rate (18.60) ⁽¹⁾ is higher than the European average – suicides are statistically more common amongst adult men in the northeastern part of Slovenia, where the main factor is the aforementioned alcohol abuse. Concerning is the constant rise of mental disorders amongst children and adolescents. First-time visits of mental health professionals in this age group due to mental and behavioural disorders have increased markedly in the last three years – by 26% at the primary and by 70% at the secondary level ⁽²⁾.

In Slovenia, there is still a significant lack in research, strategies, policies and programmes to prevent mental disorders. On the other hand, improvements are seen in the rise of public health campaigns, educational lectures and workshops, especially in schools, but also on digital media platforms. Moreover, remarkable progress has been made in the fight against stigmatisation of mental disorders, which is most harmful, especially in adolescence. Focus on mental health at this time is an important predictor of adult mental health, with the onset of almost half of all mental disorders beginning before the age of 14. Progress has also been made in the workplace – free counselling and workshops regarding mental health and stress management are sometimes offered to employees.

However, stigma is still very much present. Consequently, fewer people seek appropriate medical help – the average person often ignores or fails to recognise the possible symptoms due to the common mentality, that these disorders can't happen to them, and moreover, due to stress, related to possible consequences at work or in the family. In addition, Slovenia is experiencing a shortage of counselling centres, psychotherapy specialists and clinical psychologists. Poor access to mental health care is yet to be resolved – waiting lines are very long and the lack of funding is alarming. Noteworthy is also non adherence to the medication regimen for some psychotropics in the first two to four weeks of therapy, when the worsening of events most often occurs. This is the point, where community pharmacists play a key role, which includes giving advice about the correct use of medicines, listening to the patients' concerns and setting clear expectations, which are crucial to ensure therapy compliance. Considering stigma and access issues, this would mean that in Slovenia, only an estimated 1.5% ⁽³⁾ of people with depression are treated properly. Yet, there is more that community pharmacists could do in order to better the mental health of patients. Pharmacists should pay a great amount of attention to the patient's medication regimen because of potential interactions, which could be the reason behind the ensuing mental health issues.

Additionally, it is important to re-check possible interactions with the already prescribed medicines. This process could be enhanced with a mandatory pharmacotherapeutic review and higher number of clinical pharmacists in hospitals, which is currently still low. Nevertheless, with the focus of community pharmacies on consulting, advising and services, such as revisions of prescribed medicine regimens, many of the potential issues are already being addressed.

ŠSSFD is aware that to a great extent, mental disorders are shaped by the social, economic, and physical environment in which each individual person lives. We recognise efforts to mitigate the stigma surrounding mental illness as one of the key strategies. Even though stigma and shame are usually deeply rooted, step-by-step changes can be made by educating people about the care for mental health and the dangerous effect of stigma. In the past, ŠSSFD has organised educational lectures about depression and a Public Health Campaign on Mental Health. This year, the focus was on burn-out syndrome, which was presented from the point of view of a mental health professional and psychology professor. The latter spoke openly about her personal struggle with burn-out syndrome, which added great educational value to the event itself. In the future, ŠSSFD plans to perform more workshops in schools, as the mental health of society is based on the good mental health of younger generations. ŠSSFD wants to pursue for a stronger collaboration with the National institute of public health, the Ministry of health and other interprofessional organisations, mainly in projects about the healthcare sector's role in treating mental disorders alongside other crucial factors, such as the social, economic and physical environment people live in.

All in all, everyone's contribution is essential in order to properly promote mental health. This is why ŠSSFD favours a holistic approach, which encompasses all multifactorial sectors. ŠSSFD urges healthcare professionals to focus on advising the patient, re-checking possible interactions between medicines and offering support via conversation. ŠSSFD encourages the healthcare system to provide more counselling opportunities, to ensure proper education of healthcare professionals and also to further improve access to the healthcare system. The importance of preventive measures must not be neglected. This complex problem calls for a multidisciplinary approach. ŠSSFD believes that not only the clinical environment but also the socio-cultural and environmental context must be renewed.

1. <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/SVN/slovenia/suicide-rate>
2. <https://e-uprava.gov.si/download/edemokracija/datotekaVsebinska/323441%3Fdisposition>
3. <https://www.nijz.si/sl/o-depresiji>