

Recommendations

The results of the studies presented in the Forum confirmed a significant increase of mental distress in the portuguese population since the beginning of the economic crisis in Portugal. Available evidence presented in the Forum show that a number of factors linked to the economic crisis - namely, unemployment, declining incomes, financial deprivation and declining socioeconomic status - are significantly associated with the increase in the prevalence of mental health problems and common mental disorders that took place in Portugal. On the other hand, the existence of high social support and living in neighborhoods where people feel protected and socially integrated have proven to be protective factors in relation to the risk of having mental health problems.

Data presented in the Forum also revealed several insufficiencies in the response of the health system to the increasing pressure for mental health care, both in terms of access to care and provision of minimally adequate treatment.

Based on the discussion of other countries experiences reported in the Forum and the debate that was made on the policies that have proved to be effective in alleviating and mitigating the mental health impact of economic crisis, the following recommendations can be made:

1. To meet the new mental health challenges of the economic crisis in Portugal, mental health should be considered one of the priorities in the public health agenda. The relative neglect of mental health that has occurred in the last few years should be replaced by seeing the economic crisis as an opportunity to innovate in mental health policy and to improve the implementation of mental health reforms that are needed.
2. A holistic and comprehensive strategy should be adopted with the involvement of several sectors, including measures to improve social protection, decrease income inequalities, mitigate the impacts of unemployment, and improve the efficiency and quality of the mental health system.
3. To address the consequences of unemployment, active labour market programmes, including special programmes for young people, programmes to promote employment for people with disabilities, and debt relief programmes, should be strengthened,.
4. A special attention should be dedicated to family support programmes that may address the effects of the crisis on children.

5. The measures proposed in the National Mental Health Plan in order to improve the access to integrated and community-based mental care across the country, whose implementation was interrupted in the last few years, should be now put in action, as they are more needed than ever.
6. It would be specially important to ensure that all mental departments will have community mental health teams, as these teams are indispensable to ensure integrated care to people with severe mental disorders, to establish adequate collaboration with primary care centres in the provision of care to common mental disorders, and to develop prevention and promotion programmes in collaboration with primary care and different community stakeholders.
7. Restarting the implementation of the “Programa de Cuidados Continuados”, which is key to ensure adequate social care and psychosocial rehabilitation of people with severe mental health disorders, is also urgently needed.
8. In order to improve the access to and the quality of care to common mental disorders, incentives should be given to promote collaborative care models between specialized mental health services and primary care centres.
9. The advances already registered in the development of children and adolescent mental health care should be continued and strengthened.
10. The need to improve the leadership and governance of the mental health systems has been recognized at the international level as a priority objective in the mental health field. Another crucial objective is the creation of financing models that may effectively encourage the practices and interventions that have proven to be the most cost-effective and to be preferred by users and families.

The introduction of profound changes in the governance and financing of mental health services is thus an absolute priority in the present moment, taking advantage of the innovative proposals that have already been presented in Portugal in these areas.