

Reconnecting Mind and Body in Contemporary Health Systems



Eliot Sorel



Juan José López-Ibor

An in-depth look at health systems' challenges, and the opportunities for enhancing their performance, takes place this morning at EPA 2014. The symposium examines health system's performance from the perspectives of Finland, Romania, Spain and the US, utilising strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) as a model of analysis, comparison and recommendations. EPA Congress News spoke to Eliot Sorel (GWU School of Medicine & School of Public Health, and Founder of the Conflict Management Section, WPA, Washington, DC, USA), who will be introducing the proceedings and concluding them with his perspectives on the US healthcare system and the Affordable Care Act, and to Juan José López-Ibor (Fundación Juan J. López-Ibor, Madrid, Spain), who will be speaking on the Spanish

healthcare system.

This symposium is the second of its kind, the first Health Systems Performance Roundtable, which focussed on all continents, having taken place at the World Congress of Psychiatry in Bucharest in April

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last year. The third is planned for this September in Madrid, where Asia-Pacific, Africa, Europe and the Americas will be tackled together.

The need to identify the prob-

lems and solutions in healthcare systems is both a public health matter and an economic one. Non-communicable disease, of which mental disorders are part, take the lead in the global burden of disease. "Mental disorders and non-

communicable disease do not occur in silos," said Professor Sorel. "They frequently co-occur. For instance, if you have diabetes or hypertension, or cancer or stroke, all of those very

likely have co-occurrence of depression, certainly in the vast majority of cases."

One of the most startling figures, noted Professor Sorel, is that the global burden of disability represented by mental disorders is between 30-45%. "There is no other set of conditions that comes anywhere near," he said. "The global burden of mental disorders per se is 14%; but the disability is 30-45%. So we need to think about it in three ways: what is the global burden of disease generally; what is specifically the global burden of mental disorders; what is the global burden related to comorbidities; and what is the global burden regarding disability?"

Such a burden comes with a heavy cost, one that could be reduced with better organisation of

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care. Professor Sorel continued: "I was privileged to be invited to be an expert advisor to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] in Paris. The OECD, for the first time in their history, focussed on mental disorders. In my wildest dreams as a young student of medicine I would never have thought that the OECD would have an interest in mental disorders."

This econocentric turn, explained Professor López-Ibor, is being felt in Spain as it is around the whole of Europe, and not least because of the global financial crisis. "The issue that we have here in Spain, which is also happening in other countries, is that we cannot afford what we have. Our healthcare system in Spain follows very much the model of the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK, although things are changing. I think the NHS in the UK is a very good example of how you should organise the care of patients in general. It seems to work better than other places, which does not

mean that it is perfect."

Spain comprises 17 autonomous regions, said Professor López-Ibor, each with its own healthcare system, and the mental health priorities change from one to the other. "The panorama is so different from one place to the other," he said. "With the changes in America right now, with Obamacare, this is a hot issue in healthcare. The thing is not to forget about the care of people with mental disorders, which very often happens when you make plans for a new healthcare system."

The sorts of implementations that are hoped to increase the efficiency of Spain's NHS include management models taken from the private sector, yet the threat of change has been met with resistance from some in the Spanish population. Professor López-Ibor said: "The moment of change is very complicated. Our worry is that in this moment of change, where there is shortage of money, psychiatric care will suffer more than others. That is why we organised the

whole project. There is a need for change, but how the change needs to be done is not easy, because you need a lot of consensus. Many people in this country are proud of their health service. The feeling is that we have a system which belongs to every citizen. This is a psychological issue involving the fear that cuts will come and that number of employees will be reduced, or that hours will increase, or that there will be more control."

While economics must be considered, the fundamental attitudes and values of healthcare professionals can vastly improve quality of care, as Professor López-Ibor has demonstrated over the last few years of his public clinical responsibilities. "I tried very hard to implement managerial techniques for the care of patients. I was Director of the Institute for Psychiatry and Mental Health of the Complutense University. I had 250 people working at this institute; you have to open the doors 24 hours a day, all days of the year, treating patients,

so it is a really difficult job to run.

"We have to administer what we have and what we have is not only economic resources, but it is also values and knowledge. You have to administer these to the benefit of every single patient that comes to your unit. This management is not economic management, it is the management of values, knowledge and human resources. My experience has been very positive. We were very transparent, which is important in psychiatry, because people tend to say, 'we never know what you do with your patients, you are very strange people, we don't understand what you do, you have length of stays longer than anyone else...' All of these problems you can solve if you have a good managerial approach to your activities."

Professors Sorel and López-Ibor will be speaking during the session 'Health Systems' Performance: Euro-Atlantic Perspectives', taking place today between 08:00 and 09:30 in Room 21A.

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