

Suicides - The Elephant in the Room

Target 3.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations relates to the reduction of mortality from non-communicable diseases and the promotion of mental health i.e. by 2030, reduction by one third of premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment, and promotion of mental health and well-being. *Is Malta on the right track to achieve target 3.4?*

Mental health problems affect a nation's wealth, productivity and well-being both directly and indirectly. Using the traditional human capital approach, the costs of mental disorders globally have been estimated to be approx. €2 trillion in 2010. Nonetheless, using the Value of Statistical Life to calculate the economic impact of mental disorders – quantifying subjective risk-values - the global economic burden of mental disorders has been estimated at €7.2 trillion in 2010, higher than that of oncology, chronic respiratory illnesses, and diabetes. This economic burden is expected to almost double until 2030.¹ Mental disorders also constitute the 3rd leading cause of overall disease burden (as measured by disability-adjusted life-years), following cardiovascular disease and oncology, in the WHO European Region.²

A recent reply to PQ No. 8828 of the 14th legislature of the Maltese Parliament in May 2023 clearly states that during the last 10 years there were 261 suicides in Malta with the ages of the victims ranging <25 years to >75 years. Of note is the fact that the Maltese population has increased considerably during the past decade.

The numbers speak for themselves. If one would include all attempts of suicides, the numbers would logically be much higher. In 2023, a total of 12 suicides were registered over 5 months between January and May alone. It is worrying that during the past decade we have seen no improvement in local suicide numbers which mostly affected men and non-foreigners. Such inertia needs to be addressed with urgency. **Indeed, the collective number of suicides <25 years of age which occurred since 2021 [at least 10 suicides] have reached those reported collectively during the preceding 6 years [2015 – 2020],** and we are still in Q3 of 2023. In keeping with this, the pernicious effects of the recent advent of social media should be considered.

The reasons which lead to the contemplation and eventually, to a suicide attempt, are multi-factorial and these may include personal, familial, economic and societal challenges which are faced by the victim. Indeed, many times the person who contemplates a suicide is a victim of circumstance. Their family is often also a victim. Let us never forget this.

The Maltese Government and the Maltese Society must actively contribute more to mitigate the challenges faced by vulnerable subpopulations in Malta. One must not only

translate these suicide numbers into years of productive life lost and economic value of lost productivity. We must not risk missing the forest for the trees.

Recently, media reported for example, that on 20 July, Mount Carmel Hospital was left for 4 hours in pitch darkness without electricity at night during a heatwave since the generators failed to start up, to the detriment of healthcare professionals and vulnerable patients alike. The kernel of the matter here is not power cuts since these may happen during prolonged heat waves; rather, it is the lack of appropriate generator backup in Mount Carmel Hospital. Such incidents should never occur.

In keeping with this, the provision of mental health services should be prioritised, including facilities and staff. The much awaited *Mental Health Strategy for Malta 2020-2030* published in 2019 stated that Malta will have a new acute psychiatric hospital and that Mount Carmel Hospital, built in 1861, will be renovated. Of note is the fact that such renovation has now been scaled down.³

It is important that we, all of us, embark and champion a national strategy which engages community members in shared activities, supports socio-emotional learning programs, teaches parenting skills to improve family relationships and supports resilience through educational programs. Such concerted efforts, spearheaded by the Maltese Government, should include as many stakeholders as possible including our extended families, schools, football clubs, band clubs, Scouts, etc to help percolate thoroughly in our societal strata and modify the granular forma mentis of our culture which is constantly evolving. The future is ours to embrace but we must champion the rights of our precious vulnerable subpopulations.

Let us be bold and be an advocate of those who require help. The ones who need it most may be the ones who search the least for it. Help may be sought from 1770 (Richmond Foundation), Suicide Prevention, Outreach and Therapeutic (SPOT) services by appointment on 21228333 (Victim Support Malta) and 179 (FSWS). Anonymous chats such as kellimni.com are also available locally. Public officers can seek the help of the Employee Support Programme (ESP) on 22001210, by appointment.



REFERENCES

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3. Press Release. European Commission. NextGenerationEU: European Commission endorses Malta's €328 million modified recovery and resilience plan, including a REPowerEU chapter. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3485.