

## HELIOS II -

### ***Psychiatric Involvement in the European community***

*The European Community is well known for various progressive economic, social and cultural initiatives, with more and more countries, including Malta, wanting to join this block of nations. The EC is also intensely involved in the advancement of medicine, with programmes of academic education and practical experience. In psychiatry the EC has set up HELIOS, which stands for Handicapped Persons Living Independently in a Normal Society.*

*During the last week of November 1994, the HELIOS II conference was held in the town of Ghent, in Belgium, which is the seat of the EC. The author of this article, together with two senior nursing officials, were invited to participate in the proceedings.*

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### **The Conference**

The meeting was organized to tackle the problems of social integration of those mentally ill or having learning difficulties. Various lectures dealing with this theme were delivered, including an address by Dr. P. Lamoral, President of the Helios Team of Experts, who spoke on the European social context of the programme. Other Speakers included Mrs. M. Kyriazopoulos, of the Helios team, who gave an overview of the work of the past year, as well as plans for the next.

An integral part of the conference was the setting up of four workshops, which were formed during the opening session. Workshop One dealt with sheltered living and adapted accommodation, and the assistance provided by the interdisciplinary team in connection with social and economic integration. The second workshop tackled staff training within the integration, while the third concentrated on the elimination of social and psychological barriers for the mentally ill.

The fourth workshop was entitled "Reintegrating People with Mental Health Problems". The Maltese delegation recommended two proposals, one on the importance of cultural considerations in dealing with mental health field, and appropriate measures to combat it. Both proposals were accepted, and included in the final list of recommendations of the conference.

## Extra Curricular Activities

Besides the conference, the Maltese delegation was taken on visits to various psychiatric services and facilities in the Flanders region of Belgium, in order to familiarize themselves with the provisions at first hand. It should be pointed out that Belgian experts from this region are helping the mental health authorities in Malta to implement a mental health reform.

One of the most striking facilities was the Guislain Psychiatric Hospital in Ghent. Built in 1850, this 300 male bed facility has been gradually upgraded from a hospital to a psychiatric centre. There is a clear distinction between patients in hospital for treatment, and clients in the psychiatric care houses, situated within the same grounds. On the admission ward, patients are assessed and graded into an orientation group, a dependency group, and a psychiatric group. There are also longer term wards and a mixed psychogeriatric unit.

The occupational therapy service at Guislain provides three structured activities:

(a) Rehabilitation Centre: this is ward level treatment in the narrow sense. There is empowerment of the interdisciplinary team in a specific area, e.g. the admission ward, with a social worker, and OT and so on. The team

specializes either on pathology lines, e.g. schizophrenia, or in the philosophy of work, i.e. psychosocial rehabilitation teaching skills while accepting the disability, or psychoanalytical.

(b) The Social and Cultural Centre: here the clients are looked at in a different light, with the premises of the centre being utilized like a club, with regular activities, lectures, meetings, and exhibitions, mainly in the afternoon and evening.

(c) Activity Centre outside the hospital: a number of vocational rehabilitation centres are found in the region, with regular work activities provided for the clients, with possible resettlement in the open job market.

One is very impressed by certain facilities like independent living projects, where mentally ill people can, following training, develop skills to perform independently in group living in the community, with minimal supervision. Many of them go out to work, do their own cooking, as well as other domestic skills. The sheltered workshops also provide social and vocational support for many clients otherwise deprived of a routine in their lives. One noticed the variety of work projects provided by local industry, and the motivation of the clients, who work there for no payment (they get state welfare benefits instead).

## Conclusion

The conference was a stimulating getting together of persons having practical experiences in the mental health field, including users and non governmental organizations. Cross fertilization of ideas and constructive dialogue were the hallmark of both lectures and working groups. The theme which came over repeatedly was the need to remove more barriers impeding those who are mentally ill / with learning problems, in the areas of employment and housing. Another important aspect put forward and accepted by the delegates was to put integration of this client group into more practice, by having users themselves participating fully in future sessions of HELIOS.

The visits to the facilities provided a veritable shot in the arm, with a vast array of ideas suitable in the present climate of change and reform pervading the local scene.

## Forthcoming International Events

- **3rd International Congress for Hand Therapists, Helsinki - Finland**

*Date: 5th & 6th July 1995*  
*Venue: Congress Hall, Helsinki*

- **The College of Occupational Therapists 19th Annual Conference & Exhibition**

*Date: 12th - 14th July 1995*  
*Outcomes and Innovations*  
*Edinburgh 1995*

- **1st Asian-Pacific Occupational Therapy Congress**

*"Towards Quality Care"*

*Date: 25th - 30th September 1995*  
*Venue: Kuala Lumpur Hilton*

- **World Federation of Occupational Therapists 22nd Council Meeting, Nairobi - Kenya**

*Date: 24th - 29th March 1996*  
*Venue: Nairobi - Kenya*

- **Vth European Congress of Occupational Therapy**

*Date: 17th - 20th September 1996*  
*Venue: Madrid - Spain*

*For further details on the above and any other possible international events, one can contact the Secretary or Assistant Secretary of the Malta Association of Occupational Therapists*