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Corona and the psychosocial consequences: The Swiss Association for Counselling (SGfB) lobbies for public health

For years, the Swiss Association for Counselling (SGfB) has been working to ensure that counsellors and counselling services in Switzerland meet appropriate quality standards. With the Corona crisis, however, another commitment is becoming increasingly important: the efforts to have the costs of psychosocial counselling covered by health insurance.

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The effects and concrete consequences of the Corona crisis are probably as incalculable as they are confusing. But if this pandemic is a magnifying glass, as has been said in many quarters, then what is meant is that the psychosocial situation in our society has become so magnified and so clear. The latest survey by the University of Basel on mental stress in the second Covid 19 wave (www.coronastress.ch), published on 17 December 2020, showed that mental health problems among Swiss people have practically doubled compared to the spring. The proportion of people with severe depressive symptoms was around 9 per cent during the lockdown in April and rose to 18 per cent (1.5 million) in November. The damage caused by this crisis in this area is thus being named more and more frequently. In addition to the economic consequences, attention is increasingly focused on the psychological damage: Overburdening of families, educational backlogs, domestic violence, but also the effect this period has on the youngest, those who want to count on the future of this country: worrying deficits are opening for their psychological and social development. An event of the century not only this pandemic, but also the psychosocial consequences?

The SGfB was founded in 2006 to shepherd the diverse offers under one roof. This umbrella should serve as a contact point for those seeking counselling and at the same time guarantee a serious quality assurance of this offer. This is particularly important in situations where life and limb are literally at stake.

As SGfB we know the needs in society for counselling and psychological support. It is our task to take care of the recognition of this professional group as well as quality assurance, i.e., we offer certified further training and the qualification as self-approved counsellors.

The field of psychosociology belongs to that of health, and so it would be obvious that the costs of these services would be covered by the health insurance companies. And here we come to a delicate point of demarcation - that between psychotherapy and psychological or psychosocial counselling. The services differ in training and tariffs.

In psychotherapy, one traditionally speaks of patients, which indicates that they are to be cured. It is therefore a problem situation that is regarded as 'sick' or 'disorder'. Psychological or psychological problems of the patient are worked on together with the therapist and help is provided to cope with them. The aim is to change the patient's experience and behavior. Traditionally, therapy was carried out by psychiatrists, i.e., doctors, so that the responsibility of the health insurance company for the costs did not have to be discussed. It is also possible that psychiatrists delegated a treatment contract to therapists. A medical diagnosis prior to treatment is essential.

In the psychosocial field, the situation is much more ambiguous and unclear, because the reference to health is not made automatically. Those seeking advice are people who expect psychological help for their personal problem situation. They are therefore more commonly called clients, and they usually pay for the service out of their own pockets.

Of course, it is not only with the outbreak of the corona pandemic that there is a need for psychological counselling, therapeutic accompaniment, and support in coping with difficult phases and situations in life. However, the psychological burdens are high for many people and increase for more and more people the longer this period lasts. In the meantime, politicians have also realized that the consequential damage of this period will be considerable for people and society as a whole for a long time to come.

However, this also brings us to the issue of costs or the assumption of costs for services that relate to health in the broadest sense. The traditional distinction between "sick people with disorders" and "healthy people with problems" is no longer a criterion for having the costs of therapy reimbursed by health insurance for some, while others do not seek help because they cannot afford the costs.

That is why efforts are now underway on the political stage to allow psychological therapies to be covered by basic health insurance. By the time you read this, the vote on the amendment to the ordinance to introduce the prescription model will have taken place in the Federal Council. The Minister of Health, Alain Berset, proposed in the consultation that family doctors should also be allowed to prescribe therapies. The conservative forces oppose this because it would mean additional costs of half a billion francs a year for health insurers. The insurance association Santésuisse, which has drawn up this cost calculation, assumes that the admission to the health insurance system would put psychologists on an equal footing with psychotherapists trained as doctors in terms of tariffs, which would be equivalent to a wage increase (the entry into force is planned for 2022).

If you only look at the financial side, you lose sight of the whole picture. In addition, the conventional understanding, or should we say, "lack of understanding", of psychological distress, the social consequences and, ultimately, the costs incurred as a result are ignored in a market- and competition-oriented model. In this model, the profits are privatized, and the costs socialized. The price is ultimately paid by society.

Society is also in the SGfB's sights when it campaigns with all its might for psychosocial counselling to be included in the catalogue of supplementary insurances. This would allow clients to take out private insurance for psychosocial counselling. The Corona burning glass has made this demand even more topical.

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