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Editorial

“Community Integrated Health and Social Services” Conference February 21 - 22, 2014, Bucharest, Romania

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ABSTRACT

As in many countries in Eastern Europe, the Romanian Health care system was characterised by hospital-based, specialised and centrally managed health care services up to the 1990s. Decentralisation, the introduction of compulsory health insurance and the development of family health services were major steps towards improving access to curative and preventive health services at community level. However, community nursing, which had previously provided outreach to the rural poor, was practically abandoned in the mid-1990s when the salaried general practitioners providing primary health care services for a catchment population were transformed into private practice family doctors with health insurance fund service contracts, providing care based on lists of insured patients. Hence, the community nurses/ health visitors that had been hired previously within the public primary health care setting found themselves unemployed. Community level health prevention and public health services, as well as services for pregnant women, mothers and children, were subsequently stopped. A few mother and child health programmes tried to redress this problem during the early 2000s and some good practices have been documented. The new vision for Romania, The Romanian Government National Strategy for Health 2014 – 2020 [1], addresses this service gap and foresees the development of sustainable integrated socio-medical services at community level.

Since 1992, longstanding cooperation between Switzerland and Romania has connected the two countries. After a period of limited collaborative activities following Romania's accession to the European Union, Switzerland restarted programme activities within the framework of an EU agreement supporting new accession countries. The main goals of the current Swiss support programme are to reduce social and economic disparities between Romania and more advanced EU countries, and between regions within Romania. To this end, Switzerland and Romania signed a Thematic Fund Agreement in 2011, called the Reform Fund linked to Health Issues, effective until 2019. The Swiss Agency for Development (SDC) [2] has mandated a consortium of the Swiss

Tropical and Public Health Institute (Swiss TPH) [3] and the CRED Foundation – The Romanian-Swiss Centre for Health Sector Development [4] to facilitate the implementation of this agreement through the Technical Fund for Health, with the goal of broadening access to health and social services. The Romanian Ministry of Health [5] is a major partner within the collaboration.

The main objective of the Community Integrated Health and Social Services component is to strengthen collaboration between service providers at the local community level in order to improve targeting, access to and quality of services for those most in need. This includes strengthening the leadership role of local authorities, harmonising and coordinating available services, and identifying and prioritising interventions based on the needs of the beneficiaries. The component seeks to develop functional and effective models based on the specific context of Romanian communities and to disseminate them throughout the country.

Sharing information and experiences with related interventions in Romania, Eastern Europe and Western Europe is a necessary first step in order to learn from best practices and to analyse options for the Romanian context. For the present conference, with its focus on community integrated health and social services, projects were selected based on publications, grey literature and expert contacts to represent conceptual and implementation experiences from Eastern Europe, Western Europe and Central Asia. International and national speakers were identified based on their experiences and innovative ideas in the context of community integrated care and social services. Submitted abstracts were peer reviewed and selected for presentation based on criteria such as the innovation of the approach, the quality of the abstract, its contribution to the overall diversity of contexts and approaches and the feasibility of adaptation to the Romanian context.

The conference was held in Bucharest, Romania on February 21st, 2014 and combined experiences from Romania, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan as well as from Germany, France, Great Britain and Switzerland. The projects presented varied greatly in terms of character (pilot, regional or national approach), geographical context (rural/urban), orientation (volunteer-based/market-oriented) and their focus (social empowerment/cost-saving) and provided a rich source of learning and inspiration.

The conference and a subsequent workshop day were the starting point of a training component for local authorities and served to widen the scope of ideas for future interventions. With a total of eight international and ten national contributions, and more than 100 participants attending the event -- the majority of which represented the local Romanian authorities as well as community health workers and nurses -- the conference was a great success. The presentations provided participants and stakeholders with valuable knowledge and lessons learnt, which will be very helpful for future planning and implementation processes. The evidence generated from this experience will help to disseminate future intervention models in Romania.

We would like to acknowledge the support of the Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Programme to Reduce Economic and Social Disparities within the Enlarged European Union and its Thematic Health Fund, from which this conference was funded (by Switzerland). Furthermore we would like to express our gratitude to everyone involved in organising the conference and the various speakers and participants who contributed to its successful implementation.

Keywords

community integrated health, social services, Romania, Swiss agency for development and cooperation, cred foundation, Swiss tropical and public health institute

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Presentation slides available from: <http://www.cred.ro/v3/index.php/conferences/131-conference-community-integrated-health-and-social-services.html>