The role of the Italian National Institute of Health in the National Project on Mental Health (1996-2000)

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Summary. In the mid-eighties, the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS) made a significant contribution to the foundation of the WHO Center for Research and Training in Mental Health in Italy, with the Institute director Francesco Pocchiari as first president. In the nineties, an extensive and successful project of research in mental health (Progetto Nazionale Salute Mentale, PNSM) was directed by ISS after financing with public health funds (DL.vo 1992/402, art. 12). The ISS unit conducted research on rehabilitation facilities (census and evaluation of the characteristics of a large random sample; Progetto Residenze, PROGRES). ISS continued to participate in subsequent projects in the same field, conducted by Regions with adequately qualified Mental Health Services; a significant example is PROGRES ACUTI (census and evaluation of facilities for acute patients).

Key words: mental health, psychiatric rehabilitative facilities, PROGRES projects.

INTRODUCTION

The National Project on Mental Health (Progetto Nazionale Salute Mentale, PNSM) [1] was approved in 1996 and financed with seven billion liras from the special fund established by the 1992 Health Act (DL.vo 402, art. 12) – a fund aimed at supporting research in public health and related activities of direct interest for the Italian National Health Service (Servizio Sanitario Nazionale, SSN). In fact, the Act of foundation of the SSN (Law 1978/833) had included the provisions of Law 1978/180; therefore, psychiatric services became SSN services, and it was a logical (but far from automatic!) consequence that research in mental health be supported by the aforementioned fund.

THE ANTECEDENTS OF PNSM

Before the launching of PNSM, the Italian National Institute of Health (Istituto Superiore di Sanità, ISS) had played a significant role in mental health research, starting shortly after the establishment of the Epidemiology Department in 1976, and particularly after Pierluigi Morosini came to work in this Department (for details, see previous articles in the present series).

In the mid-eighties, another initiative supported by ISS was the foundation of the World Health Organization (WHO) Center for Research and Training in Mental Health in Italy. This initiative originally proposed by the leaders of four groups who had considerable experience in psychiatric and psychopharmacological research: Carlo Lorenzo Cazzullo and Giorgio Racagni, of the Institute of Psychiatry and Institute of Pharmacology, respectively, at the University of Milan; Dargut Kemali, of the Institute of Psychiatry at the University of Naples; and Michele Tansella of the Institute of Psychiatry at the University of Verona. The latter institution had been a pioneer in experimenting on direct connections between research and training at University Medical Schools and mental health services of SSN, by operat-
ing as Department of Mental Health on behalf of SSN in part of the Verona area.

The proposal to create the Center was strongly supported by Norman Sartorius, Director of Mental Health at the WHO headquarters in Geneva. However, the development of SSN after the approval of Law 1978/833, including the provision that ISS operate as its technical-scientific body – which had triggered an additional significant increase in the Institute’s resources of personnel and funds, superimposed to the previous one following the ad hoc Act for the reorganisation of ISS (Law 1973/519) – had created a gap consisting of the fact that the main interlocutors of WHO in Italy were absent from the proposed plan for the new Center. At this point, an additional round of negotiations between the various parties led to the designation of the ISS Director, Francesco Pocchiari, as President of the Center, which could start the procedures aimed at evaluating candidatures for participation in the Center’s activities.

Quite rigorous criteria, based on an accurate examination of institutional research and related credentials and on site visits, were agreed upon and implemented by the evaluation group, which included Sartorius, the four original Italian proposers, and Pocchiari with the present writer assisting him as secretary of the Center. Two institutions were accepted in addition to those of the four original proposers; namely, the SSN Department of Mental Health in Trieste and the Istituto di Ricerche Farmacologiche Mario Negri in Milan. The former was the site where the development of various types of extramural services for mental patients had succeeded already in the seventies, under the guidance of Franco Basaglia, in eliminating long-term hospital stays before the approval of Law 180. (For this reason, Trieste had been previously included among WHO mental health services pilot study areas, as shown by the report in the ad hoc 1987 WHO publication [2]). The latter was an internationally well-known independent institute with a qualified record in psychopharmacological and mental health research.

Subsequent moves, however, were blocked by insurmountable obstacles. Specifically, the Center had an urgent need for a minimum of funds in order to enable the launching of multi-center joint projects involving the participating institutions, in addition to those performed by each one of them with own resources. The strenuous efforts of Pocchiari in this direction did not produce the expected results: and it was not a mystery that the main obstacle was the fact that ISS, having already succeeded in obtaining the leadership of important multi-center research projects (in particular those on tumours and AIDS), including the administration of the respective financial resources for both intramural and extramural work, was vetoed by various interested parties for any further “trespassing” into other areas, like mental health research. As a consequence, a zero sum game went on until the death of Pocchiari in January 1989, when it became evident that ISS could not afford keeping the responsibility of the leadership of the WHO Center.

Even with these limitations, the foundation and initial years of life of the Center produced significant positive results, ranging from a facilitated access to research and other funds for the participating institutions, to a more and more extensive role played by them on the national and international scenes. Specifically, experienced persons from the participating institutions, particularly the Trieste department, were repeatedly called to serve as service directors in various Italian regions and as advisors in foreign countries; that is, to help in the efforts to improve their mental health services, and in particular to phase out large institutions for long-term stays of mental patients.

THE NATIONAL PROJECT ON MENTAL HEALTH

A few years afterwards the situation started changing in a more favourable direction. After the aforementioned fund for public health research was established in 1992, ISS – thanks also to the fact that a qualified epidemiologist, Paolo Pasquini, had moved from his previous areas of work to research in the mental health area, which led to a considerable strengthening of the Morosini group – was able to propose an ambitious project (PNSM) which was strongly supported both by the Minister of Health, Elio Guzzanti, and by the ISS Scientific Advisory Council. Two of its members must be gratefully remembered for their qualified efforts to provide convincing expert opinions which led the Council to a unanimous favourable resolution; namely, Benedetto Saraceno, who was later to become the successor of Sartorius as Director of Mental Health at WHO, and Nicola Rizzuto, chair of Neurology at the University of Verona, where he had picked up the heritage of Hrayr Terzian, who had played an important role to promote the projects of Franco Basaglia and to support the approval of Law 180.

Rigorous conditions were implemented by an ad hoc scientific committee for the evaluation of proposals for participation in the PNSM, including three stages – ex ante, yearly verifications of progress on the basis of interim reports to be discussed in open meetings of all participants, and ex post. While the reader must be referred to the final report [1] and to the publications quoted therein for a detailed description of the various activities in PNSM, at least one example of their considerable scientific and operational value should be given here. This concerns a multicenter project conducted by the group at ISS, which had been further strengthened by the hiring with temporary contracts of Giovanni de Girolamo, a clinical scientist with previous considerable experience in research in the mental health area (including an extended period of work in the group of Sartorius at WHO), and other co-workers (see “Conclusions”). This project, named PROGRES (PROgetto RESidenze), was aimed (i) at taking a census of almost all Italian facilities, both public and private, for the rehabilitation of mental
patients and (ii) at an evaluation of the features of a large random sample of these facilities, from several viewpoints, such as logistics, characteristics of the patients, profiles of the personnel employed, therapeutic and other types of intervention, etc. The results, published in qualified national and international journals, have been widely recognized as constituting a unique body of information on this important component of mental health services, considering in particular that the best work conducted in other countries on this topic has mostly been restricted to partial samples of the facilities in question.

AFTER PNSM

While PNSM was coming close to its end – which for example entailed the termination of the funding of the contract for one of the ISS unit leaders, de Girolamo – the ISS group drew up the draught of another ambitious project (PROGRES ACUTI) aimed at taking the census and evaluating the facilities for the care of acute patients, both public – the Servizi Psichiatrici di Diagnosi e Cura, SPDC, of SSN Mental Health Departments, and the ad hoc units in University Departments – and private. In the meantime, thanks to a large extent to the PNSM experience, the know and the know-how of mental health research, as well as the awareness of its relevance for improving the quality of mental health services, had spread to an extent which led the responsible authorities to start an important experiment; that is, to decide that the leadership of projects of research in mental health approved for financing with public funds should be assigned to individual Regional administrations which could rely on qualified mental health services. In particular, the leadership of PROGRES ACUTI was entrusted to the Region Friuli Venezia Giulia and in particular to the Trieste Department of Mental Health, with Giuseppe Dell’Acqua as principal investigator. The ISS unit, remaining in close contact with de Girolamo after his return to his previous position in the Bologna services, made a significant contribution to the success of this project which, again, resulted to be unique in its kind in the face of the more partial features of similar research conducted in other countries.

CONCLUSIONS

The experience in the leadership of PNSM as well as subsequent developments before and after the retirement of Morosini in 2008, shortly before his demise - including the formal founding in 2004 of a Mental Health Section in the ISS Center for Epidemiology - have allowed a progressive strengthening of research in mental health conducted at our Institute. It is not within the scopes of the present paper to illustrate these developments in any detail. It should at least be mentioned, however, that important projects supported by public funds have been repeatedly approved for conduction by the ISS group; for example, a project for the epidemiological surveillance in mental health, particularly concerning severe mental disturbances (Project SEME, led by Antonella Gigantesco) and a project for the screening and integrated management of depression in various types of medical services (Project SET-DEP, led by Angelo Picardi).

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References

