



**Mental Health Recovery: Partnering for Change**  
**Occupational Therapy Conference**  
**The Imperial Sliema (Lord Strickland Multi-Purpose Hall)**  
**Friday 21<sup>st</sup> April 2023**

09:05 – 09:15      Opening speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca

Before starting my brief contribution to this important conference, I would like to commend the Malta Association of Occupational Therapists for enticing health professionals from diverse fields, to explore, deliberate, and discuss, ways of partnering for positive change in Mental Health care for better impact.

I will focus my contribution from a global perspective for comparative reasons, but even more so, as we as a country, we have international commitments to meet.

In this manner, I believe it will help to stimulate your thoughts further, to lead your focus to effective action, but also in the context of our commitments in a global community.

I must note from the outset, that Mental ill health today, is being considered globally, as the leading cause of disability.

Mental Health today, is also being considered globally, as a most important component in achieving sustainability and the necessary development goals, for the benefit of our communities and global impact.

In fact, Target 3.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals as outlined in the UN Agenda 2030 states and I quote:

**By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being’.**

I am convinced that you, agree that the current situation is indeed worrying both on a national and international level. I will mention some obvious reasons such as:

- The coronavirus pandemic, that led to an increased diagnoses of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.
- Depression is considered as one of the leading causes of disability. To put into perspective, I also must note that:
  - a. Depressive symptoms grew from a base of about 193 million people worldwide to 246 million, which is an increase of 28%, following the pandemic.
  - b. Anxiety disorders grew from about 298 million people affected to 374 million, which means an increase of about 25% increase<sup>1</sup>. and
  - c. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)02143-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)02143-7/fulltext)

Moreover, in some countries, people with mental health conditions often experience severe human rights violations, discrimination, and stigma. We in our country, are not exactly extraneous to these experiences.

In the context, I therefore must mention the United Nations Principles for the protection of persons with mental illness and the improvement of mental health care, states that and I quote:

**“All persons have the right to the best available mental health care.”<sup>2</sup>**

and that

**“All persons with a mental illness, or who are being considered as such, shall be treated with humanity and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.”**

The fact that mental health care must be grounded in a human rights-based approach, is also emphasized by the World Health Organisation, through its guidance on community mental health services: promoting person-centred and rights-based approaches.

In the words of the Director-General of the World Health Organization, mental health must be an integral part of universal health care. His precise words are

**“Nobody should be denied access to mental health care because she or he is poor or lives in a remote place.”**

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<sup>2</sup> The [United Nations General Assembly](#) set of principles for the protection of persons with mental illness and the improvement of mental health care.

- We need to act now to empower communities and individuals to attain the highest standard of health, which can only be achieved when their mental health and well-being is ensured, and their rights respected.
- We need to push forward for mental health policies to be put in place through advocacy.
- We need to improve quality early interventions and services for individuals with mental health conditions, including substance use and neurological disorders.
- We need commitment to a multi-sectoral approach, which means we do not work in silos, but collectively, as families and communities, on mental health interventions at critical phases based on the specific needs of each country.
- Within communities, there is the need to build relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love, and hope to people with mental ill-health.

The beauty of your conference today, is the emphasis on a multi-disciplinary approach, as it is only when you, as a group of diverse health care professionals, come together, that we can have a stronger voice and a more significant influence on policy and services that can make an immense difference in people's lives.

I am informed that during this conference you will be focusing on a person-centred approach.

I commend you for intending to take such an approach in engaging with, responding to, and supporting people with mental ill health.

We need to respond to people's individual needs and values, just like we need to:

- Treat all people, including those with mental health problems, with dignity, compassion, and respect
- Offer personalised care, support, and treatment.
- Enable service users to recognise and develop their strengths and abilities, so they too can live an independent and fulfilling life.
- Understand their aspirations and goals.
- Empower people with mental health problems by involving them in decision making about their own lives.
- Focusing on relationship-building and maintaining hobbies.

Such an approach would truly generate a partnership that would serve people with mental health issues to be part of their own recovery and would help them to get take control over their lives.

Yet, the support given to people with mental health problems, must go beyond health care.

We must consider the social conditions that impact directly or indirectly on people's mental health.

These factors include education, employment and working life conditions, housing, basic amenities and the environment, social inclusion, and social protection, where needed.

Some of you may be aware that the Malta Trust Foundation together with the Mental Health Association Gozo, during these last years we have put a focus on community based services, by supporting people with mental health in the community, and also a year ago we have opened a state of the art facility with Dar il-Kantuniera, for persons with mental health challenges, aimed at helping them to transition from hospital to their community.

Dar il-Kantuniera is a short stay facility where residents are empowered through a 12 weeks programme. They receive individual and group therapy, together with assistance to build the necessary skills to help them return and live in their community.

During their stay, residents receive the support of an array of professionals while living in a home environment, which is a safe space for them, and surrounded by a community that has accepted them.

I truly believe that Dar il-Kantuniera offers hope and a sense of dignity to all of our residents.

This home embraces the environment of a family, serenity, specific support....it provides hope and life again, a sense of dignity and empowers these persons to believe in their abilities and capacity to return to their family and to the community.

Since much of my endeavours are dedicated mostly with and for children, I will end my contribution by focusing on children and young people.

Research shows that half of all mental disorders start before the age of 14 years. Yet most cases go undetected and consequently, untreated.

The Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children Study shows that across 11-year-olds, 13-year-olds and 15-year-olds, the percentage of boys and girls in Malta who report either feeling low or feeling nervous, is higher than the average amongst all countries in Europe and North America.

Girls consistently report these feelings more commonly than boys.

We also know that there is a lack of psycho-social support in the early years, a situation that has a direct impact on mental wellbeing that continues in later years.

With this in mind, the Malta Trust Foundation is helping to address this lacuna and now spearheads a Counselling Service within schools, through a project which we call the Blossom project.

I am pleased to announce that the service is being extended to Gozo.

The Blossom project aims to reach students who would need support with behavioural and psychosocial issues at school. Teachers often report incidences like pupils turning up to school hungry, tired, or psychologically troubled by incidents taking place at home or in their social environment.

The assessment of the project identified outcomes that ultimately are an eye-opener to the real-life situation of the needs of children in our society.

In schools where the Blossom project is run, a medium of 20% to 26% of children needed and accessed the counselling services.

Most of these children present issues of behaviour, anxiety, family dysfunction, separation or divorce, anger management and low self-esteem. Some also are afflicted with self-harm and unfortunately also, with suicidal ideation at a very young age.

The Malta Trust Foundation is continuously expanding the Blossom project to more and more schools, as requests by Heads of Schools keep pouring in, with our next addition being Gozo, being launched next week.

I will now end my contribution with a quote from the Lancet Commission on Global Mental Health, which says:

**“All countries can be thought of as developing countries in the context of mental health”<sup>3</sup>**

This basically means that there is no country, whatever it's economic growth and/or social achievements, that can boast that mental health is being given the necessary ongoing priority on its agenda.

This also means that our endeavours to prioritise mental health should be an ongoing process and can never rest as to achieving the full and complete outcomes for our society.

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<sup>3</sup> The Lancet Commission on global mental health and sustainable development 2018

Finally, I would like to commend your important and essential work and encourage you all to work together on mental health and wellbeing, so that everyone can live in dignity, in good health, enjoy fulfilling meaningful lives, and be able to achieve their full potential.

I augur you a successful conference.