



2023: The game changing year for rehabilitation in the WHO European Region?

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2023: The game changing year for rehabilitation in the WHO European Region?

Dear Editor,

The need for rehabilitation in the World Health Organization (WHO) European Region has arguably never been greater and continues to grow, whilst many still do not have access to the services they need. An expanding and aging population, the rise of noncommunicable diseases, the war in Ukraine and other conflicts, the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic which includes a backlog in rehabilitation service provision and the needs of patients with Long COVID, and disasters such as the earthquake in Türkiye and Syria are driving the increasing need for rehabilitation, whilst also spotlighting attention on rehabilitation to the highest authorities in health in the region.

WHO encompasses rehabilitation as a key component of universal health coverage [1] and an essential health service in emergencies [2]. It defines rehabilitation as “A set of interventions designed to optimise functioning and reduce disability in individuals with health conditions in interaction with their environment [3].” However, many countries cannot meet the rehabilitation needs of their population due to underdeveloped services and a lack of rehabilitation professionals, resulting in avoidable life changing consequences for those whose rehabilitation needs are delayed or unmet, creating barriers to inclusion in education, employment and society at large [3].

Until recently, we have not had quantifiable data to support advocacy efforts. We recently published WHO Europe regional and country specific data on the need for rehabilitation, based on the Global Burden of Diseases study, using a previously published methodology [4]. The landmark report “The need for rehabilitation services in the WHO European Region” [5] highlights that 2 in 5 people in the WHO European Region have a condition amenable to rehabilitation during its course, and in some countries that figure is as high as 1 in 2. The report dispels common myths: rehabilitation is not a disability-specific service needed by only a few, nor is it a luxury service. Evidence shows that these deeply imbedded myths, combined with a lack of awareness of rehabilitation and its benefits and rehabilitation workforce shortages, perpetuate the profound unmet need for rehabilitation [6].

Furthermore, the data presented in the report is also available through the WHO European Health Information Gateway (<https://gateway.euro.who.int/en/datasets/rehab/>). The data platform allows users to browse and interact with the data describing the need for rehabilitation services for each country in the Region. Data are presented since 1990 and are disaggregated by sex and the resource is available in English and Russian. The country specific data highlights specific areas in need of actions, supports advocacy efforts and directs policy development needs.

To be effective with advocacy, rehabilitation messaging needs to gain the attention of decision makers, policy implementers and donors. Access to recent and high-quality national data evidencing the rehabilitation needs, such as that presented in the report and in the WHO European Health Information Gateway, can greatly

boost advocacy efforts. Service users, rehabilitation professionals and other stakeholders can base their advocacy efforts on such data and evidence when asking governments to implement solutions for increasing access to quality rehabilitation services.

Such is the growing need and increasing recognition of the widespread benefits of rehabilitation, in May 2023, the first ever resolution on rehabilitation was passed at the World Health Assembly, WHO’s global decision-making body attended by delegations from all WHO Member States. This momentous resolution solidifies the importance of rehabilitation within health systems as an essential health service worldwide, and should be a catalyst for action, providing the foundation for development, which would benefit all.

Rehabilitation is a “hot topic” right now, and stakeholders at all levels need to harness the attention from recent events, the new data, and political commitment to advocate for the development of rehabilitation services, to optimize the function and health of the population of the WHO European region and to support an inclusive and prosperous society. WHO has the technical expertise and tools required to support Member States in developing rehabilitation within their health and social care systems.

Could 2023 be rehabilitation’s moment? If a global pandemic, disasters, conflicts and the first ever world health assembly resolution on rehabilitation are not the catalysts for action, what else will it take?

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