

Parliamentary Breakfast

27 May 2015, 8:00 am

“Standardisation of therapeutic services using the example of psychotherapy”*

Federal Chamber of Psychotherapists in Germany

Dear Dr. Niebler, dear Dr. Schwab, dear Members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like first of all to express my thanks to you for giving us the opportunity to draw attention to the problems, in the view of the Federal Chamber of Psychotherapists in Germany, that would accompany a process of standardizing that included that of health services. As far as we are aware, the activities of the European Committee for Standardization do not extend to health services for the treatment of mentally ill people.

However, I can perceive scenarios, in particular with regard to the huge subject of E-Health, in which attempts may nevertheless be made to develop standards that would also affect the treatment of mentally ill people, the key term being "internet psychotherapy".

Imagine, if you would, that the CEN were to set a standard for psychotherapeutic treatment services on the Internet. At first glance, this could appear sensible, in fact maybe even necessary. Would not a Europe-wide standard contribute towards stemming uncontrolled growth within a service that can be offered across Europe because the Internet does not recognize national boundaries? Would such a standard not bring with it more security for mentally ill people seeking advice? At first glance, maybe it would.

However, what if we question whether psychotherapy is at all suited to being standardized?

The answer is clearly NO. An individualized communicative service is based most particularly upon a relationship of trust between patient and service

**Check against delivery - the spoken word takes precedence*

provider. Trust can only be generated via an individualized and not a standardized means of communication. In order for this to happen, patients and psychotherapists initially need trial sessions in order to establish whether a feasible working relationship can develop between them. In Germany, patients therefore have the right where necessary to have further trial sessions with other psychotherapists at the cost of their statutory health insurance provider. The details of an act of individualized communication cannot be standardized. This is particularly the case as regards both the making of a diagnosis and the carrying out of psychotherapeutic treatment by a psychotherapist.

Is this also the case for psychotherapy via the Internet?

Yes it is, and in a particular way. As a rule, an acceptable therapeutic relationship can only be established in direct personal contact. This is also the case with regard to making a correct diagnosis. Psychotherapy via the Internet cannot replace diagnosis and treatment by a psychotherapist who is in direct personal contact with the patient. Internet therapy can only supplement psychotherapy in direct personal contact in particular cases and only when an intensive weighing-up process with regard to individual risks and chances has been conducted. This has been made provision for in the professional code of the German chambers of psychotherapists in order to take into account these professional concerns and minimize the risk to patients. The professional code applies to all psychotherapists in Germany. A Europe-wide standard could contribute towards these standards being circumvented by providers from different countries and thus endanger the safety of the patients, because for these providers the professional code is not binding.

Could a standard help to establish Europe-wide minimum standards for psychotherapists' qualifications - at least for providers of Internet psychotherapy?

It would be desirable, because the psychotherapeutic professions in Europe today are very varied, and indeed in many countries they are not regulated at all. But what would a possible common standard of this nature look like? Would it not orientate itself, as the minimum standard, according to the lowest common denominator, and thus undermine the high standard of the German qualifications? We therefore also see in a Europe-wide standardization considerably more risks for patient safety than opportunities.

The example of Internet psychotherapy makes it clear that a regulation of psychotherapy on a European level and by means of a standard would be at the same too little and too much.

- It would regulate competitively: In Germany, rights and obligations in the field of healthcare, also with regard to the patients, are regulated by the professional code. Members of the psychotherapeutic profession are thus also responsible for the rules regulating professional practice and for quality control regarding the provision of services. All of the over 40,000 psychological psychotherapists and child and adolescent psychotherapists are members of a chamber of psychotherapists, which carries out the supervision of the profession. The chambers are legitimized and also monitored by the state. The field of psychotherapeutic healthcare provision in particular is unthinkable without the regulatory competence of the nation state.
- It would endanger standards of quality: In the interests of the patients we reject the determination of framework conditions by a non-medical committee.
- It would have too little legitimation. A regulation under private law does not have the quality of a legally binding standard. In Germany, the approved psychotherapeutic methods and standards of service provision - for which the health insurance providers also cover the costs - are set out by the self-regulating body of doctors, health insurance companies and hospitals, with the inclusion of patient representatives and the right of veto for the legislators.

In summary, once again a clear YES for the setting of the goal of quality-controlled healthcare provision within the whole of Europe, but a clear NO to Europe-wide standards, because they endanger high national standards of quality and thus patient safety.

The psychotherapists' chambers in Germany stand for quality-assured psychotherapy. This must not be put at risk in order to cover rising demand in a cheap manner - and this rise in demand does exist.

The increasing of mental stressors in the workplace and surroundings make better access to psychotherapeutic treatment services necessary everywhere in Europe. It is important that the member countries share information about their national framework conditions and examples of best practice in order to broaden their knowledge base and learn from each other. Europe should grow closer in this respect. European politics can support this process in a number of ways. As psychotherapists we would wish in this respect in particular that

- the building of networks and swapping of expertise amongst professional groups on a European level be better supported by means of financial contributions than is the case at the moment. The BPtK has initiated a „Network for Psychotherapeutic Care in Europe“ in which experts from 16 member-states exchange information about the concerns of their profession. Financial support is essential for this kind of scientific exchange.

We would also wish that

- new research results would be disseminated and their production assisted. European research funding is very much oriented towards the major players (pharmaceutical companies). It would be important to fund more research into evidence for "talking medicine" and to bind public funding of research into the use of new medicines to constraints in such a way that when testing effectiveness, a direct comparison with alternative procedures such as for example psychotherapeutic methods could be included.

We, the BPtK, see the chances at the European level in learning from each other on a voluntary basis within the framework of the open method of coordination.

The Federal Chamber of Psychotherapists in Germany (Bundespsychotherapeutenkammer: BPtK) is the working group of the individual state psychotherapists' chambers of the psychological psychotherapists and the child and adolescent psychotherapists in Germany. It was founded on 17th May 2003, and all twelve individual state psychotherapists' chambers belong to it. It

represents the interests of over 40,000 psychological psychotherapists and child and adolescent psychotherapists on a federal level.

Its tasks include amongst other things the promotion of initial and continued psychotherapeutic training, working towards as uniform as possible a regulation of psychotherapeutic professional obligations and the fundamental principles of the psychotherapeutic profession, engaging in assuring quality with regard to the practising of the psychotherapeutic profession, and working towards sufficient provision of psychotherapeutic care for the German population in the curative, preventative and rehabilitative fields.

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Federal Chamber of Psychotherapists in Germany