

Behavioural Medicine in Poland

I would like to give you a brief report of BM in Poland. I tried to consult it with the Polish authorities in health psychology. Still, let me emphasize that this is a description from the psychologist's point of view.

Let me start with classical Schwartz and Weiss definition. Its very first sentence introduces an interdisciplinary approach, which means that both behavioural and biomedical sciences are a base for prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation in the area of somatic health and illness. When we look at BM in Poland it's almost impossible to find anyone who uses this term in order to describe her or his professional activity but when we take a closer look we can easily recognize structures and activities which could be named as behavioural medicine according to Weiss definition.

At the time being, we have more than 10 thousand psychology students. Every year almost 2,000 of them receive a master degree in psychology. We have about 30 psychologists per 100,000 citizens, comparing to only 5 psychiatrists. So, the human potential is really huge.

There are 14 academic centres which provide psychology studies: the majority of them are state universities, although the biggest one (in terms of a number of psychology students) is non-public. BM is not taught as a separate subject, although its elements are on the curricula in 9 academic centers, mainly as courses in health psychology. They include specialization for undergraduate students and optional courses and seminars. Components of BM are also present in post-diploma education, especially in clinical psychology. The academic centres also provide relevant research. They are usually conducted with an interdisciplinary approach and present high methodological quality. Main areas of research include: cardiology, oncology, coping with somatic illness and patient-doctor relationship. Although it was mentioned before that an interdisciplinary approach is a standard for research projects, in a great majority of them, however, approach is the only thing we can observe. In fact, real cooperation between psychologists and physicians is extremely rare. The representatives of these two professions treat one another rather as a consultant, not as an equal research partner.

In professional activity elements of BM could be recognized even before the year 1977, that's to say, before the Yale conference during which the idea of BM first emerged. What I am talking about is the team led by Professor Askanas, founder of the first Polish institute of cardiology. That team operating in the late 60s included not only cardiologists, nurses, physiotherapists and dietetist but also psychologists and even a lawyer. So at that time it was unique in Europe because of its real interdisciplinarity. Similar therapeutic tradition is related to the rehabilitation of people with movement disabilities. Now psychologists work rather as consultants, mainly in research-teaching hospitals and in wards with a long history of psychologist employment. Thus, at least to some level, such a situation is unfortunately a regression when comparing to the past. Hospitals with therapeutic teams tend to be really exceptional. What's more, it's difficult to find a psychologist in smaller or less prestigious hospitals.

To sum up, we have plenty of psychologists and a positive social attitude but we also have barriers for further development. Paradoxically, there is no mandatory legal act to formally recognize the profession of psychologist in Poland. The tracks for career in research and in practise are separate. In general, the relation between academic and professional worlds in psychology may be described as isolated. Psychologists are popular in Poland, e.g., they are often invited to present their opinions in the media or to participate in interdisciplinary discussions. But, the role that psychologists can play as governmental consultants on important policies that influence the psychosocial life has been underestimated. And last but not least: the extremely bad financial condition of the NHS undoubtedly discourages many people from career in that area.