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WÜRZBURG’S ‘RAINBOW SOCIETY’

A BRIDGE BACK TO LIFE

Awards for scientific achievement in medicine abound. But what about recognition for the tireless care that social workers give people with mental illness — day in and day out?

BY CHRISTINE KERN FRANKFURT/MAIN

Through its Schizophrenia Reintegration Awards, Eli Lilly and Company recognizes social workers, as well as physicians and nurses — and now, journalists — for outstanding promotion of reintegration. In 1996, Ursula Berninger, social education worker and chairperson of the Rainbow Society, was awarded the prize in social work for her program at the Psychiatric Day Clinic of Würzburg University.

Selected by an international panel of psychiatrists, she received a cash contribution on behalf of the reintegration program, as well as a memento, at the Ninth Congress of the European College of Neuro-psychopharmacology (ECNP) in Amsterdam late in 1996.

"The first therapeutic steps for reintegrating patients should be attempted individually and as soon as possible after the acute treatment of a schizophrenic episode," Berninger said. Together with her colleagues at the Psychiatric Day Clinic here, she strives for smooth reintegration of patients by combining public projects and private enterprises.

From her work in the day clinic, she became chairperson of "The Rainbow Society of Friends and Patrons of the Psychiatric Day Clinic Würzburg." She is also head of a model project conducted by the government of Germany’s Lower Franconia region, giving patients a "Helping Hand in Professional Life" and easing them from partial inpatient treatment to a "normal" life.

Clinic-Outpatient Link

The day clinic opened here in 1981 as a contact point for psychiatric patients to shorten their inpatient stay or to avoid it altogether. Patients are offered medical care provided at the university’s psychiatric hospital, as well as rehabilitation programs at the day clinic — work therapy, teamwork and independent living guidance — and therapeutic services provided in the Würzburg area.

Sixteen patients who live “outside” — with their families or in board-and-care apartments — come to the outpatient clinic daily. About 75% suffer from schizophrenia or related symptoms. “These symptoms can only be successfully treated with a therapy that combines medical treatment and psychotherapeutic management, as well as gradual social reintegration,” Berninger said.

After morning group sessions with therapists, they practice their working skills for three hours — office skills, computer operation and crafts such as making doll houses or toys in the carpentry shop. Others sew bags, baby blankets or weave rugs. They are compensated for their work based on joint assessments by patients and staff and paid on a weekly
basis by the Rainbow Society.
Afternoons, they participate in ergotherapeutic group activities such as discussions, music and painting sessions. Any remaining time is spent on walks, sports, sightseeing or shopping trips. All these activities are tailored to the patients' special needs, giving them a sense of success and strengthening their self-confidence for a life "outside"—free from anxiety.

**Living 'Outside'**
"A reasonable one-room apartment with a nice kitchen and bathroom is often still a dream for them—a desperately difficult undertaking," regrets Berninger. After inpatient treatment, they often find themselves without any financial resources, facing a long waiting period before benefiting from their rehabilitation programs. On top of that, they have to endure the prejudices of landlords and potential neighbors, according to Berninger.

"The Rainbow Society was founded in 1987 in response to the huge lack of dwellings, long waiting periods for rehabilitation benefits and a frequent turnover of staff," Berninger said. Through donations and membership fees, the society now has three apartments shared by eight patients, as well as a "crisis apartment" in the Versbach district of Würzburg, where patients can live and receive immediate psychiatric attention. Volunteers and relatives maintain all the apartments. "Without this private commitment, our work would not be possible," says Michael Osterheider, MD, a member of the society's board, which finances the apartments on its own, through monetary and furniture donations.

**Jobs**
The society works with local medium-sized businesses to establish apprenticeships and protected workplaces, as well as part- or full-time jobs for the patients. To date, the society has counseled about 90 patients on job-related issues. "People with mental
symptoms, causes, prognosis and treatment of schizophrenia; how various medications work to neutralize biochemical processes that may produce the disease; signs warning of the imminence of a new outbreak; the possibility another family member could suffer from the disease; qualities to look for in professional treatment; and deciding at what point legal intervention is needed.

Patiagorsky's next dream is the establishment of a clubhouse based on the Fountain House Model (see "Clubhouse Model," page 3, and "The Clubhouse Effect," page 6, Living with Schizophrenia, Vol. 2, No. 1). “Our biggest problem is finding appropriate transitional jobs for people with schizophrenia, and the clubhouse offers that kind of employment,” she says. “The big thing is to offer them a place where they can go — away from the hospital setting, away from anything which says ‘illness.’”

The dream is nearing reality: as parents of a child with schizophrenia, they have offered a building for the club-house. “Now all we need is money to pay salaries for two people to run it and more money to fix up the old, abandoned building,” she says.

**Editor's Note:** APEF hopes to export its experience to other countries in Latin America. For details, write Martha Patiagorsky, APEF, Arribenos 2290, 1428 Cap. Fed., Argentina; Tel: +54-1 786-3979; Fax: +54-1 780-2461.

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**A Bridge Back To Life**

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illness who display social, motivational or communications disorders have a hard time re-integrating into the workplace nowadays,” says Berninger. The regional Lower Franconian government offers them occupational guidance in finding — or keeping — jobs. Individual advice is always available from counselors at the Würzburg clinic.

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*For Schizophrenia Reintegration Awards program information, contact: Lilly Awards Secretariat, Weber & Associates, PO Box 80, Thame OX9 3GX, England; Tel: +44 1844 216 716; Fax: +44 1844 260 706. In the US, contact Lilly Awards Secretariat, PO Box 913, Mundelein, IL 60060-9956; Tel: 1 847 566 9940; Fax: 1 847 566 9941.

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APEF PRESS — A Latin American Congress press conference spawned major media coverage.