

Letter from . . .

Kaunas (Lithuania)

ALEKSANDRAS KUCINSKAS, Chairman, Kaunas Branch of Lithuanian Psychological Association, Ozeskienes 16, 3000 Kaunas, Lithuania

The city

Kaunas is an old city situated in the middle of Lithuania, on the Nemunas and Neris rivers. With a population of 430,000, it is the second largest city in the Republic. From 1918 to 1940 it was a provisional capital of Lithuania. Kaunas has many parks and is surrounded by woods. Despite having an industrial economy with its consequent ecological impact, Kaunas is a well planned city, and is often compared with the cities of the Netherlands.

The city has many important health care and research institutions. The scientists of the Academy

of Medicine, the Institute of Cardiology and Health Research Centre participate in many international programmes. Kaunas is a participant in the Healthy Cities Project.

Mental health care institutions

Two psychiatric hospitals are the biggest mental health care centres in Kaunas. One of them, situated in the Old City, has 460 employees and 655 patients treated in 10 departments. The other, in a suburb, has 500 employees and 785 patients treated in 15 departments. Treatment is largely pharmacological.



This house, which stands near the central street of Kaunas – Laisves Aleja (Boulevard of Freedom) – contains a hot-line telephone service, a youth vocational guidance and psychological counselling centre, and a psychological consultation office “Viltis” (“Hope”) for adults. The Kaunas Branch of the Lithuanian Psychological Association is also based here.

There are also two psychiatric departments and, in addition, a department specialising in neurosis in the biggest city hospital, the Clinic of the Medical Academy. Psychotherapy is applied to some degree only in the neurosis department. At the out-patient clinic of this hospital a family therapy unit has been operating for about 20 years. There are also consulting rooms with one psychotherapist in each in the out-patient clinics of four other general hospitals.

Kaunas is far behind in its provision of mental health care services, not only compared with other European cities, but also in relation to the capital, Vilnius. The development of these services is a considerable challenge in the implementation of the Healthy City Project. Two professional organisations – the Lithuanian Psychological Association (LPgA) and the newly established Lithuanian Psychiatric Association (LPtA) – are mainly concerned with this.

In 1990 the LPgA helped to establish a 24-hour telephone hot-line, manned in shifts by 14 psychologists. This telephone hot-line is the most easily accessible and understandable mental health care service in the city. The LPgA is now going to establish a crisis intervention centre, which will have another telephone hot-line, an anonymous consultation unit, and a psychological emergency team.

The LPtA is involved in a project to establish a psychotherapy centre for adults and young people. A kindergarten for mentally disturbed children has recently opened in Kaunas. It is very important, because children's mental health care had been neglected in Kaunas.

Mental health care in other institutions

Some general hospitals have psychologists, mainly involved in diagnostic work. Psychiatrists and psychotherapists also do some consultation there. However, the provision of psychological and social rehabilitation in general hospitals is very poor. There are no such social workers in Lithuania at all. The LPgA insists that in every hospital there must be a psychotherapy and rehabilitation unit with a staff of psychotherapists, psychologists and social workers to take care of general patients.

Nearly 20 psychologists, mostly part-time, are employed in Kaunas secondary schools. The shortage means their work is neither systematic nor effective enough. The situation will change with the advent of a school psychological service, already approved by the Ministry of Education. At universities and other educational institutes there are no mental health care services. The students may receive some support from psychologists in the vocational guidance centres, most of whom have a clinical background.

Employees in most work places are not provided with mental health care. However, some of the biggest enterprises have relaxation rooms, and in some factories people are being taught about healthy lifestyles, as part of a preventive health care programme being carried out by medical scientists. The LPgA believes that at the major working collectives, a psychological help service should be established, with teams to run psychological relaxation sessions, to mediate in personnel conflicts, to investigate the psychological climate in various departments, and to make recommendations for areas of improvements.

Non-professional mental health care

Contributions from non-professionals are almost absent in Kaunas. We have no patient or ex-patient organisations, and no self-help groups for persons with specific mental disturbances or specific psychosocial problems. Only one self-help group, for handicapped persons, led by a psychologist and a psychotherapist, has functioned for more than one year. During the last two or three years there have been attempts by non-professionals to establish clubs for lonely adults and for teenagers with psychological problems. Most of these have failed because of lack of organisational skills on the one hand and low motivation on the other.

We have a growing number of organisations for persons with specific problems, for example, the union of veterans of the war in Afghanistan, the society of handicapped persons, an association for families of mentally retarded children, and so on. All feel the need of psychological assistance to their members. Some of them invite mental health care specialists to assist. But all of them are mainly preoccupied with improving the living conditions of their members, and not directly improving their mental health.

There are many visiting non-professionals from the former USSR who make visits to demonstrate 'parapsychological effects', 'psychotechnical methods' and the 'cure' of various diseases. These activities are similar to those of some religious movements, and as they have become so common, local government has decided to regulate them. The LPgA is also looking at the problem.

Mental health care education

There is no systematic mental health education in Kaunas. The most sound and consistent work in this sphere was done by the staff of the Central Lecturing Bureau, "Zinija" ("Knowledge"). For more than 10 years, many professionals from Kaunas, Vilnius, Russia and sometimes from the other countries have been lecturing on psychology and mental health, and

giving courses of training. Unfortunately, activity has been reduced because the Central Lecturing Bureau was reorganised in 1990, and, in the current political and economic climate, these courses and lectures have been cut back.

Generally, the population of Kaunas is poorly educated in mental health matters. The only tools of self-exploration for them are primitive "tests", published in newspapers, and horoscopes.

Some years ago a course of lectures, on Family Psychology and 'Ethics' was introduced at the secondary schools. This course had been prepared in Moscow for all schools of the USSR. In most cases this course was taught not by psychologists, but by teachers who were not well enough prepared, and it did not prove popular among pupils. At present some school psychologists deliver lectures to pupils, which are aimed at better self-understanding and improved interpersonal relations. The LPgA hopes that psychology will become part of the syllabus in secondary schools. A textbook on psychology is soon to be published.

In higher education, more departments of psychology and new courses have been introduced. Programmes for students of the Medical Academy are regularly reviewed, and more attention is now paid to psychology, psychotherapy and psychiatry. Many hopes are connected with newly re-established Vytautas Magnus University, where there is a faculty of social sciences, at which psychologists will be teaching.

The LPgA cherishes a plan to establish a 'House of Psychology' in Kaunas where children, young people and adults could be given self-evaluation tests, could participate in various self-development groups, could consult with psychologists, go to relaxation classes or listen to lectures on psychology and topics related to mental health.

Mental health and the environment

City planning and infrastructure have a major impact on the mental health of any population. The city is proud of its central street – Laisves Aleja

(Freedom Boulevard). It was transformed into a pedestrian zone about 10 years ago. However, there is a contradiction between the centre's look and its social content. The ground floors are usually occupied by shops, the first and the second floors by offices. This is the reason why the centre is so quiet early in the evening. There is a need for bars, cafes, and clubs in the centre of the city. The suburbs, from a mental health standpoint, are completely unsuitable, comprising largely obsolete, mainly wooden, one-floor houses lacking the most elementary sanitary installations. All the new developments are mainly of one type: five-, nine- or twelve-floor blocks. Social infrastructure is almost absent here, except for some restaurants. These districts are called the city's 'bedrooms'.

The environment for children gives ground for deep concern. New developments have no closed backyards; the playgrounds are poorly planned, lacking in imagination and quality. The kindergartens and schools, where children spend most of their time, are built to a standard barrack-like design.

Such problems are common to all the cities in Lithuania. Their solution requires new politics as well as substantial financial support, but change takes a long time. Mental health professionals must not forget these problems: the LPgA has therefore established a small working group on environmental psychology.

To compare with the provision in other European cities, Kaunas should have about 300–500 psychologists. (In Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, with 20% more inhabitants, there are about 300 psychologists). There is a great need for psychologists in hospitals and in schools, and soon in factories and in the various new enterprises. We expect a significant growth in the private practice, and in the number of small highly specialised psychological centres. At least 1000 specialists from different spheres (medicine, education, management, etc.) could become closely connected with psychology (as psychotherapists, counsellors, advisers, social workers and so on). All of them are members or potential members of the Kaunas branch of the LPgA.