



## EPA GAINING EXPERIENCE PROGRAMME REPORT

On the observership at the Ospedale Eduardo Bassini – Cinisello Balsamo, Mental Health and Addiction department, Nord Milano Community Health and Social Care Trust (ASST), University of Milano-Bicocca, Milan, Italy

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It is with great pleasure that I write this report about the time spent at the Mental Health and Addiction department in Milan, Italy, as one of the winners of the 2023-2024 EPA Gaining Experience Programme for Early Career Psychiatrists. I was highly enthusiastic about this programme and the experience fully lived up to my expectations.

My supervisor during this observership was dr. Daniele Cavaleri. Prior to my arrival in Milan, Daniele was very helpful in providing me with all the necessary details and information. Once I arrived at the clinic, he made every effort to assist me with the accommodation process and to ensure I had a productive experience.

What is special about Italy - apart from its stunning landscapes, amazing art and delicious food – is the organization of its psychiatric care services. In 1978, due to the efforts of Franco Basaglia, a shift from an asylum-based system to a community-based mental health system started. The current framework promotes treating the patients in the community and it includes many specialized structures, such as psychiatric wards located in general hospitals, community residential facilities, mental health centres, and day-hospital and day-care units. I wanted to learn about the operational details of this model of functioning straight from the source in order to integrate the gained knowledge into my practice.

During my 3-weeks stay in Milan, I spent half the time in the psychiatry ward at the Hospital Eduardo Bassini and half the time in the outpatients' psychosocial center. This allowed me understand and value the Italian mental health care system, as I witnessed how the medical team continued to support patients after they were discharged from the psychiatric ward. My activity during the observership varied from attending and performing clinical interviews of inpatients and outpatients, participating in clinical evaluations of patients in the emergency department, participating in discussions regarding patients' management issues, including medical treatment and other therapeutic procedures, getting involved in therapeutic team meetings, attending clinical case presentations and taking part in ward rounds.

Daniele also introduced me to the staff in the research department and helped me get a glimpse of their academic work ethics and their completed and on-going research projects. I participated in



forensic psychiatry team meetings and got to learn about the legal framework for psychiatric patients. I learned about the challenges of addressing ethnical diversity in psychiatric services (ethnopsychiatry) and the assessment of the cultural context of mental disorders. I was also lucky enough to attend a lecture held by Prof. Giovanni Castellini at the University of Milano-Bicocca on the gender affirming path in Italy. Prof. Castellini delivered a very interesting talk about the psychiatrist's role in gender-affirming care, providing both theoretical and practical insights on the first clinical evaluation and the follow-up care during and after the transition.

I got familiar with the services offered by the day-care units, i.e. rehabilitative and social reintegration activities, expressive activities and training, and job placement support. Additionally, I became acquainted with the activity of the community residential facilities, where individualized therapeutic-rehabilitative projects are provided for up to 18 months to patients with major mental disorders who need to recover or enhance their psychological, relational, and social functioning. Such facilities are underdeveloped in my country, which is unfortunate, as they could significantly benefit psychiatric patients by improving their quality of life and easing the social challenges related to major mental disorders.

I got a positive impression of the organizational culture in both the psychiatric ward and outpatient department, and I appreciated the favorable working conditions, the relaxed atmosphere, and the staff's strong theoretical knowledge and clinical expertise. However, what I valued most was the close therapeutic relationship the staff built with the patients and their families.

What I noticed during my brief contact with the Italian mental health care system is the importance mental health professionals give to teamwork. In psychiatry, more than in other medical specialties, I think this is pivotal for the clinical activity, and it serves as the most effective method to ensure that proper care is delivered to patients. I saw patients receiving a complex intervention in a team that tries to understand the patient's level of functioning and their needs and tries to find solutions to meet those needs.

Everyone that I got the chance to interact with – specialists, trainees, nurses, social workers, patients – were friendly and incredibly patient with me, despite my not being a native Italian speaker. The staff made me feel comfortable and took the time to ensure I understood everything.

This programme was for me a great learning opportunity. I admired my Italian fellows' professionalism in the way they interact with and care for their patients. I came back to my home institution in Bucharest, Romania, full of enthusiasm and with new insights that I am willing to implement in my daily activity in order to improve patients' standard of care. I strongly recommend this programme to other Early Career Psychiatrists. It has been an incredibly valuable experience, offering me both professional and personal development!