

WHO, Geneva  
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**Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland  
Director-General  
World Health Organization**

**World Health Day Celebrations**

Commissioner Byrne,  
Colleagues and friends,

Earlier this week, I was in Kenya for a number of meetings with the Secretary-General and the other UN agencies, using the occasion to have an early start to the celebrations of World Health Day.

I visited Mathari Psychiatric Hospital, which is Kenya's only national mental institution. I talked to a number of patients. One in particular stays in my mind. A bright young girl explained to me how she had become psychotic after a period of drinking too much alcohol and smoking marijuana. She was a student at one of Nairobi's universities and now concerned that she would not be able to get back to school and finish her courses.

The doctors told her she now had good chances of recovering and returning to her normal life. She was grateful for the support and treatment she had received, and determined to move on.

Until some years ago, Mathari was a typical mental institution of the old kind, like thousands of others around the world. It had more than fifteen hundred patients crammed into too little space, and they all stayed for months, often years. Physical restraint and idleness often took the place of proper medication and psycho-therapy, and when coming out, a stay at Mathari had branded them for life. Once a psychiatric patient – always a mental case, was the common judgement among people. In Kenya, as in so many other countries around the world.

Now, Mathari has cut down the number of patients to around 400. The average stay for inpatients is around 14 days. Patients get proper care, which includes

medication and other therapy. Mathari is now a place to recover before returning to society to continue life – it is no longer the end of the road.

Hopefully, this young girl will find that society has also changed. That an experience of mental illness does not brand her for life.

Today, as we celebrate World Health Day, we will hear much more about stigma and the damage it does. We will hear about the violation of the basic human rights of patients, mainly of those in large psychiatric institutions. And we will hear about the tremendous gap between the number of people who are ill and those who actually get the treatment they need.

But we will also hear about the effective treatments that exist. How prevention and early detection can drastically reduce the burden of severe mental illness or the effects of brain disorders. We will hear how the families of those who suffer, and the local communities, can play a key role in supporting and assisting patients in the struggle to regain their full mental health and their role in society. We will hear how mental health care and prevention needs to be integrated into main health services, so that primary health care includes mental health, and that those who need hospitalization more often can stay in ordinary hospitals with other patients who suffer physical illness – and not be separated in special institutions, surrounded by ignorance and fear.

By the end of today, I hope all of us who are here – but also the many millions who will celebrate the day in thousands of venues around the globe – will gather new hope. Hope based on a sense of change. Change of perceptions and realities.

This is the second time the World Health Day focuses on the theme of mental health. The first time, 42 years ago, we already had a clear view of the need to fight stigma and discrimination and to bring mental illness in from the cold – into communities and ordinary health care.

The difference is that today, we have better knowledge, we have better medication, and we have a better understanding of what works and what does not.

We now really can challenge each other and the world to Stop Exclusion and Dare to Care!

Thank you.