



#AnserAnnualMeeting2017

Picture presenter

Science and policy around Sexual Assault Care Centres in Belgium

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The problem

- Care for survivors of sexual violence in Belgium is fragmented and diverse:
 - Police
 - General practitioners
 - Emergency ward, gynaecology department
 - Psychological support services
 - ...
- Victims often don't know where to go (first)
- They are sent from one place to the other, often feel not understood and sometimes humiliated
- Nature and quality of care depends on where they happen to refer to first

ICRH and sexual violence

- Conducted many research projects on many aspects of sexual violence
- Coordinated the SV protocol at the University Hospital in Ghent
- Reviewed protocols of other hospitals
- Gave training for students and hospital staff on how to deal with survivors

-> quite some expertise available

But how to make this expertise lead to changes in the field?

Setting the scene

- 2014 and 2015: ICRH convened round table meetings with:
 - People from relevant institutions (hospitals, police, justice...)
 - Politicians from all parties
 - The secretary of state for equal opportunities
 - Civil society
 - Experts
- Two main agenda items:
 - How to improve care for survivors?
 - How to deal with PEP treatment for survivors in cases where the perpetrator is known but his HIV status is not?

Getting people on board

- Six meetings spread over two years
- Invested a lot of attention in bringing the right people around the table
 - People in key positions
 - Who have an interest in the topic and are open for dialogue
 - Not only advocates and those who are already convinced
- Made sure that the needs of each participant were addressed in all meetings

The outcome of the round tables

- An informal network of people across very different organizations
- HIV testing of alleged perpetrators:
 - A pilot project on voluntary HIV testing of alleged perpetrators
 - A proposal of law on mandatory testing of alleged perpetrators
- Holistic care for survivors:
 - A common ground that this option should be explored
 - Political goodwill to provide support (also due to the Istanbul convention combating violence against women)

The results 2 years later

- HIV testing of alleged perpetrators:
 - Voluntary testing: In Ghent region it as become routine practice, rolling out to other regions can be considered.
 - Mandatory testing: the law has been approved in Parliament and will come into force in 2018
- Holistic care for survivors
 - ICRH was asked to do explore options for organizing holistic care, to do a feasibility study and to set up a pilot project in three cities.

Sexual Assault Reference Centres (SARC)

- Holistic approach: Forensic + Medical + Psychosocial
- Maximal coordination, single entrance point with clear protocols and specialized staff
 - Higher quality of care
 - Better health outcomes
 - Less vulnerable for re-victimization

SARC

- The model was developed in close dialogue with all parties involved, including the cabinet of the Secretary of State for Equal Opportunities.
- This is very important for creating a goodwill basis to find solutions for conflicts of interest:
 - Ex: SAS: 'sexual aggression sets' (collecting samples for forensic evidence): made much less invasive and done by forensic nurses
Filing complaints or not? (police/justice versus caretakers)
- The first three centres opened on 9 November 2017, will be evaluated at the end of 2018 and after that the model will be fine-tuned and rolled out to other regions.

Some observations

- None of the parties could have done it without the others
- Role of scientists is much larger than just providing 'evidence':
 - Putting it on the agenda
 - Bringing the parties together as a 'neutral' convener
 - Providing scientific input in the discussions (eg studying models applied abroad, surveying existing practices...)
 - Guiding the elaboration of the 'Belgian system'
 - Writing the protocols
 - Training forensic nurses, psychologists and police staff
 - Monitoring and evaluation of the pilots
 - Suggesting adaptations to the model

Lessons learned

1. Scientists can play a catalyzing and facilitating role (not a leading one)
2. But for this they have to go beyond science (build networks and bridges, understand politics, reach out)
3. Timing is crucial (scientific and societal support, momentum...)
4. Best to have all stakeholders on board at an early stage
5. Quite some luck is needed... (very vulnerable for political events and staff changes)

Questions asked

1. How to go beyond science without losing scientific status and credibility? (redefine the role of scientists? Leave it to others to work with our findings and wait until we are 'asked'?)
2. How to deal with sensitive issues on which there is less consensus? (Wait for the right time or try to build it yourself?)
3. How can an extended role of scientists be financed? (research funds? Government funds? Multilateral funds? Structural funding or on a project basis?)