

Message by H.E. George Vella, President of Malta during the Richmond Foundation's Annual Conference, 22nd October, 2020

Dear Participants,

Let me start by thanking the organizers of this conference for bringing together professionals who are working together in the fields of mental health to discuss the impact COVID-19 is having on the Nation's Mental Health.

Thank you also for asking me to open this conference. In spite of my medical background, I still feel humbled being asked to address experts in the field, who have hands-on clinical experience in the subject.

It is still too early to discuss what impact COVID-19 will have on the Nation's Mental Health. Trying to forecast what will happen with this pandemic would be presumptuous. Even a week is too far away in the future. We can only talk with responsibility about the present, and about the scientific data we have available up to now.

What shape or form the final impact will be, we are not in a position to say.

As professionals, you can make projections. You can make predictions considering different potential scenarios. However, so many different variables can be factored into any forecast, that we can speak objectively and concretely only on what we have experienced up to now.

Comparisons with what is happening abroad, unfortunately also do not hold, as each country has its own characteristics, its climate, it's numbers, it's customs etc. Even so, there are lessons to be learnt, as well as pitfalls to be avoided.

As of today, I feel that the mental health damage done to the population by this coronavirus is already appreciable.

This is why I consider this Conference to be timely and important.

In varying degrees, I dare say, all members of the public have been affected by this pandemic. In the eight months period during which this virus has been playing havoc in our midst, it has affected our way of life, our customs, our economy, and our cherished family traditions.

In these two days, you are planning to discuss how it has affected children and adolescents, the elderly and the disadvantaged, business, employees, and the front liners.

I do understand you are choosing these categories, to simplify matters, because there is no section of the population that has not been affected directly or indirectly, to the extent of generating worries, fears, anxiety, tension, phobias, depression, and obsessive compulsive behaviors, not to mention the doomsday scenarios brought about by the possibility of losing one's job with all the attendant repercussions on one's finances and financial commitments.

Children might not go through all of this, but in their innocence and naivety - while possibly enjoying school free days, imagining them to be drawn-out summer holidays - they are missing on their education and on socializing with friends at school; an essential part of their character formation.

Children adapt, even to lessons online, but then they also absorb, and react to the tensions felt in the family by parents who lost their job or have become dependent on doling out of wage supplements.

On the other edge of the spectrum are our elderly, conscious of the fact that they are the most vulnerable and that at this stage in their lives, they have to deprive themselves from hugging and kissing their children and grandchildren, and speak to relatives thru mobile phones behind flexi glass screens.

They live under the constant fear that testing positive for COVID 19 might mean the beginning of a number of complications to which their frail bodies have not the strength to react effectively.

I am just mentioning a few instances where mentally, one has to adapt. One could reflect on the anguish and disappointment of the couple who were going to get married, seeing all their plans and dreams vanish in thin air.

One could not but empathize with businessmen who overnight are experiencing difficulties in making ends meet, if not facing outright closing down – if not bankruptcy.

Sadly, these last days it seems that we are having a peak in incidence during this second wave, and seeing published figures, and listening to reports is not reassuring at all, especially for the vulnerable.

Even this in itself is creating mental health problems. We are all being subjected to an overkill of news, data, information about COVID 19. It has dominated the media. We cannot get away from it in the news, social media etc.

The question one would like to have an answer to is” When is all this going to stop?”

I have to take this opportunity to commend the Health Authorities for guiding us through best practices and continuous exhortations to keep infection from spreading further. I also feel I should show my appreciation to all those who obey instructions and are thus contributing to the collective effort of limiting the spread.

In the same breath I have to caution those amongst us, who are neglecting taking the necessary precautionary measures. It could be carelessness; it could be COVID 19 fatigue; it could be anything.

For sure, I dare say, it could be ‘criminal’.

Our ultimate hope rests with the availability, hopefully in the not too distant future, of an effective and tested vaccine that elicits long term immunity. This could be months away. At least there is this hope on the horizon. We have to hold out for these coming months and remain positive.

The medical profession and the allied caring profession are being summoned once again to give a helping hand and expert guidance to our citizens.

Today's 'front liners', as they have come to be called over these last eight months, are associated more with the physical backbreaking tasks in which they are engaged to look after those infected by COVID-19. But it is not the physical aspect of their work which is the most difficult. It is putting up with looking at death in the face and doing all that medical science has available to clutch back those that get too near the jaws of death.

Our 'front liners' are not robots and they themselves are not immune to the psychological impacts such experiences have on their mental health. To many, this could be psychologically traumatic.

In the meantime we have to encourage all those amongst us in whichever age bracket, and category, who are finding it difficult to cope with the circumstances brought about by COVID-19, not to contain their worries up within themselves, but to open up, share their feelings with others, and be ready to accept advice and possibly treatment for their resultant mental condition.

This is nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing to hide. Nothing that makes one feel inferior. We are all different and we all have different mental carrying capacities and different breaking points.

Keeping these difficulties to ourselves is no option. Early qualified, professional attention, guidance and advice is of paramount importance to avoid further deterioration.

I am sure these two days of meeting will give you the chance to exchange information and share experiences, as well as discuss ways and means how we can reduce as much as possible the negative effects, COVID-19 could have on the mental health of our nation; and that of our dear citizens.

I wish you fruitful deliberations.