

INTEGRATING LEGISLATIVE AND HEALTH POLICIES TO PROMOTE CHILD HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

Delivering an adequate promotion of child health, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, along with timely prevention of diseases and targeted health policy can be done with the active participation of the economy, financial sector, education, social care, sports, etc. Bulgaria is a member of the WHO European region and follows the European policy on health and well-being Health 2020. In Bulgaria, the mayor of a municipality manages the social services in the municipality which are state-delegated and local activities. The mayor is an employer of the heads of these services.

Aim: *The aim of this article is to conduct a review of the policy of Varna Municipality on preventive healthcare for children and young people part of Policy 7 of the National Health Strategy.*

Materials and Methods: *Analysis of current programmes on mental and physical health in children and adolescents in the city of Varna, in accordance with national, European and global programmes has been done.*

Conclusion: *Central and local authorities that understand the need for public health promotion and prevention is the key to building a healthier society in the future. Varna Municipality is committed to working on that by financing programmes for prevention, healthcare and social activities.*

Keywords: *child health, municipality, preventive healthcare programmes, health strategy*

INTRODUCTION

New public healthcare is a complex approach based on the organized efforts of our society. In its essence it is a balance between hygiene measures and development of programmes and activities that link individual health with public health. Research made by BMGF in 2016, based on the Healthcare Access and Quality Index (HAQ), places Bulgaria at 51st position from 195 countries (6). According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child implementing sufficient promotion of child health, timely prevention of diseases and targeted health policy has to be done with the active participation of the economy, financial sector, education, social care, sports, etc. (2). Since 2007 when Bulgaria joined the European Union, government healthcare policies have been aimed at meeting EU requirements. Bulgaria is a member of the WHO European region and follows the European policy on health and well-being *Health 2020* (5).

There is untapped potential for achieving better public health in Bulgaria, respectively in preventing a large part of diseases and premature mortality, which mainly lies in promoting health and preventing diseases.

Fig. 1 indicates the primary activities related to effective functioning of child and school healthcare in line with Policy 7 of the National Health Strategy. Promotion introduces an active approach towards health and changes the individual's attitude to it (personalised approach and social responsibili-



Fig. 1. Policy 7 of the National Health Strategy 2014-2020 of the Republic of Bulgaria

ty), whereas screening changes some health risk factors in order to ward off diseases or avoid complications. Effective prophylaxis includes several key elements: improving the determinants of health (social, behavioural, ecological); engaging the population in healthy lifestyles; developing and implementing screening programmes and early detection of chronic diseases; applying interdisciplinary models in prevention activities, etc. In order to be successful, the policy for health promotion and prevention of diseases should be applied in an integrated way by all components of the healthcare system.

The policy for promotion of health and prevention of diseases must engage other public sectors as well (education, the social sphere, local authorities, businesses, the media, NGOs and the population).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Activities, included in the policy on child and adolescent health of Varna Municipality, are directed to several key areas outside the scope of the indispensable healthcare provision: social policy, protection of disadvantaged children, prevention and screening. Financial resources are provided from the municipal budget.

In Bulgaria, the mayor of a municipality manages the social services in the municipality which are state-delegated and local activities. The mayor is an employer of the heads of these services (4). The Health Act (3) regulates that municipalities may use own revenue to support activities for prevention and treatment of socially disadvantaged, unemployed

and other persons who have a permanent address in the relevant municipality. Municipal healthcare providers can receive payments from both the Ministry of Healthcare and municipalities, in addition to the National Health Insurance Fund and private funding based on a specific methodology. There has been a trend in recent years for a decrease in municipal funding of local hospitals in compliance with the current legislation. This entails the need for an increased focus on the proven health benefits of prevention.

Fig. 2 presents a summary of the policies for child and adolescent health of Varna Municipality in several areas.

Prevention activities are carried out annually in 36 schools by 900 student volunteers and 1100 teachers and cover more than 19 000 students from 1st to 12th grade. Preventive care is also provided to more than by 250 children at high risk and their families.

The social policy of Varna Municipality is implemented on the basis of current legislation, national and strategic documents in the field of social services, healthcare, employment, integration of people with disabilities, protection against discrimination. With an emphasis on developing community-based services and care in family environments, in order to substitute the institutional model of care, they are a key factor for an efficient social inclusion, combating poverty and engagement of all vulnerable groups in the life of society. Major focus areas of Varna Municipality social policies are related to the development of an effective system of social services which meet users' needs; equal access and adequacy of ser-

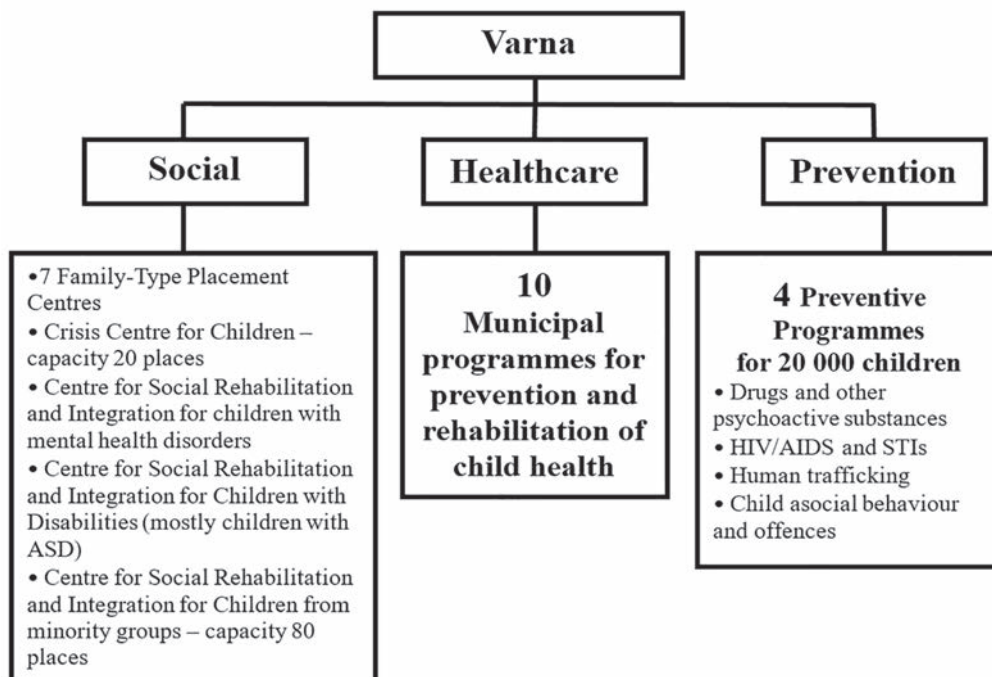


Fig. 2. Policies of Varna Municipality on child and adolescent health

vices and work for improving their quality to combat poverty, social exclusion and discrimination. In this respect, some of the social services have been transformed in the years: closing institutional care and opening new community-based services and care in a family environment (1).

Table 1 presents municipal health programmes related to child and adolescent health between 2015 and 2019. Since 2016 Varna Municipality has been extending the programme volume and scope as a result of the increase in and change of citizens' needs. The approved budget for 2019 has seen a growth in funding for public health of 61% compared with 2015. This includes expenditures for nurseries, child nutrition services, medical treatment in health offices in schools and kindergartens, health mediators, the activities of the municipal company 'Disinfection, Desinsection & Rodent Control', as well as municipal hospitals. Through the activities of the nurseries, the municipal companies and collaboration with the municipal hospitals in the city, Varna Municipality ensures and provides equal access for users, care and protection of child and adolescent health. Implementation of good practices through programmes for screening, prevention and healthy lifestyle promotes health literacy and raises the awareness of young people.

The data in Table 1 indicates that five municipal programmes carried out in the municipal hospitals of covered 10 964 children and young people. The programmes are targeted at overall screening of mental and physical development of children and adolescents from 0 to 18 years of age.

I Succeed – prophylaxis and rehabilitation of child and adolescent obesity and associated diseases. The programme focuses on a healthy lifestyle since young age and changing the dietary and physical activity habits.

Good aesthetic appearance and comfort through screening and treatment of spinal distortions – early identification, accurate diagnostics, adequate treat-

ment and appropriate physical activities can prevent adverse outcomes.

Children's Vision Screening – aimed at children up to the age of 18. The programme is performed in schools and includes free screening tests for primary school children as well as free examination of children with identified visual impairments. For the purpose a **paediatric consulting room** was provided.

Children's Dental Health Screening – early detection of caries, periodontal diseases and dental and jaw deformities prevent children's pain and dental treatment of complications due to dental decay.

Childhood Hearing Screening Programme – directed towards the youngest children in nurseries. The purpose of the programme is to carry out screening tests such as otoscopy, anterior rhinoscopy and pharyngoscopy in children younger than 3 years of age to identify decreased or impaired hearing. When hearing impairments are detected children are additionally tested with an audiogram and tympanogram.

In 2019 Varna Municipality launched new programmes in response to the changing morbidity patterns in children and adolescents:

Hippotherapy and rehabilitation for children with disabilities and developmental problems – a programme for effective physiotherapy exercises, which makes use of interaction with horses and horse-riding. Activities are adapted to the individual needs of children and monitored by a neurologist and a psychologist. Worldwide experience proves that these activities have a good impact on children with disabilities and developmental problems because therapeutic horse-riding improves their emotional and physical health.

Care of children with diabetes and children with rare diseases – it is directed towards the medical professionals and teachers in nurseries, kindergartens, schools and social services. The programme aims to train and support them in their daily care of children with diabetes and rare endocrine diseases. All of this will lead to improving health, quality of

Table 1. Municipal health programmes for children 2015-2019

Programmes	Period	Number of children
I succeed	2015 - 2019	945
Good aesthetic appearance and comfort through screening and treatment of spinal distortions	2015 - 2019	1935
Children's Vision	2015 - 2019	4038
Children's Dental Health	2015 - 2019	2593
Childhood Hearing Screening Programme	2017 - 2019	1453
	Total number:	10964

life and self-confidence in children with diabetes and rare diseases and help them feel equal to their peers.

The Green Yard of Varna – the objective of the programme is early recognition of signs of deviations in physical, emotional and psychomotor development of children from 0 to 3 through communication between parents, children, and professionals. By identifying the earliest symptoms in a particular age group professionals carry out targeted screening of early childhood development and, if necessary, refer them to the next stage, that of early childhood intervention.

Varna is a pioneer in Bulgaria regarding care of children with eating disorders. In collaboration with the specialists from the Second Child Clinic at St. Marina University Hospital pilot programmes for children with special nutritional needs have been introduced. The total number of children in child-care (nurseries and kindergartens) with specific nutritional needs is 150 and their menus are developed in accordance with the protocols provided by an expert committee for nutritional assessment at St. Marina University Hospital.

The second pilot programme is being accomplished jointly with the First Endocrinology Clinic at St. Marina University Hospital. Along with the care for children with diabetes and rare diseases it provides trainings for medical professionals in the doctor's offices in kindergartens and schools. Based on data from the First Endocrinology Clinic, 79 children in kindergartens and schools on the territory of Varna Municipality have diabetes (1).

These programmes give parents of children with eating disorders the opportunity to go back to work. Children receive high quality healthcare in municipal kindergartens, nurseries and schools by trained specialists and personnel, which supports their active socialization and preparation for each of the next levels of their physical, mental and intellectual development.

Evidence of the concern and commitment of Varna Municipality to child health is the First Interna-

tional Paediatric Scientific Conference 'Together for the Children of Bulgaria' held in March 2019. The conference was a model of good practice and collaboration between local authorities and scientific organisations. It was organised by the Standing Committee on Healthcare at the Municipal Council, under the auspices of the mayor of Varna, with support from Varna Medical University 'Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov' and Sofia Medical University. The conference was attended by paediatric specialists from Germany, Great Britain, Serbia, North Macedonia, Turkey and doctors from First Child Clinic, PICU/NICU at University Hospital –Varna who presented novel trends in paediatric formulations.

The conference addressed problems related to the relevant treatment of children and the personalised approach in paediatrics which involves improved communication among parents, doctors, pharmacists and patients and a wider use of extemporaneously prepared formulations in paediatric practice.

The problem with the relevant treatment of children has been a burning issue for years not only nationally but also in Europe and globally. The market lacks paediatric formulations allowing easy adaptation to different age groups, which leads to an increased off-label use of medicinal products hence to potential issues associated with the safety of the therapy. Available pharmaceutical products are not able to completely meet children's therapeutic needs, which is the reason to look for extemporaneous preparation of magistral and pharmacopoeial products that will help a personalised treatment meeting the child's particular needs.

CONCLUSION

Child prevention is the best investment in the nation's health. Central and local authorities that understand the need for public health promotion and prevention is the key to building a healthier society in the future.

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