

Institutionalized children in Romania - an example of historical mistakes being fixed

Background

Widespread negative effects of childhood institutionalization, ranging from global developmental delay, social communication and adaptation difficulties, psychological and emotional injury to poor general health have been recognised and described for decades. (1,2)

Romania has a history of institutionalization of children starting in the 1960s during the Communist Government when a strict pro-natalist policy was adopted. (3) This noxious system persisted for years and transgenerational effects on the society are still noticeable.

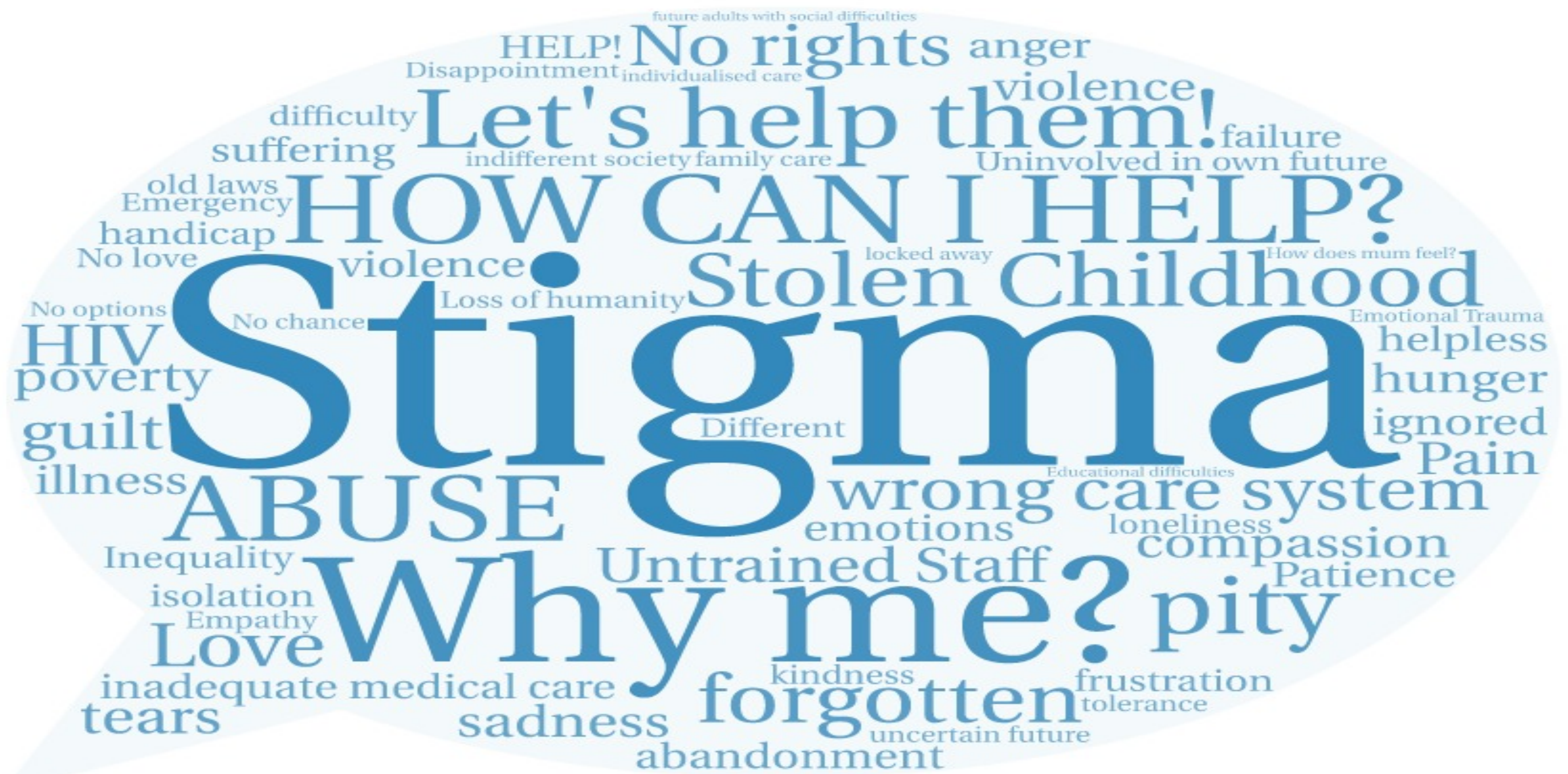
But the social care system is changing with a gradual emphasis on community and family-based care.

Aims

To understand the situation, the facts, to gather views from the Romanian society and to understand how health and social care professionals feel about institutionalized children in Romania.

Methods

A trip to children's centres allowed me to experience the difficulties first-hand. Next, I analysed the provision of care and the regulations that govern it. To explore people's vision on institutionalisation of children, I conducted an online survey enquiring about health and social care providers' and the wider public's view as well as their availability for advocacy and direct involvement in local community projects.



Results

The professionals voluntary trip to Romania was a very powerful experience. I met extraordinary children with heart-breaking stories. The current national social care provision includes family-type and community-type care and the big orphanages are being closed.

In February 2018 the **104th orphanage** was closed. Sadly that was not the last one.

My online survey had 81 respondents, 56% working in health/social care. 75% knew about the problem from different sources. 68% did voluntary work in children's institutions. 70% rated their own feelings regarding institutionalization as negative, they mentioned powerful ideas listed above (word-cloud), asked how can they help, recognised the level of inequality and expressed empathy and love for the children.

Conclusions

Institutionalization of children is extremely harmful. The best environment for a child to grow up in is a loving family, not an institution.

The Romanian society's views on institutionalization are changing. The public is more aware of the problem and increasingly more available to contribute to improvement.

Every individual, regardless of professional role, can make a difference by advocating for a compassionate, supportive care for children currently growing up in institutions and for a better care provision for future children at risk of family separation and institutionalisation.

A major policy mistake was made, but speaking about it and raising public awareness is the best way to drive positive change for these children.

References:

1. Medical and Developmental Sequelae of Early Childhood Institutionalization in Eastern European Adoptees, DE Johnson (2000)
2. Young Children in Institutional Care at Risk of Harm, R Johnson (2006)
3. <http://www.legex.ro/Decretul-770-1966-363.aspx> Decree 770, 1966 regarding termination of pregnancy.