

Brian Symington

Michael Schwartz and I would like to thank the organisers of this International Congress for the opportunity to share our presentation on the 2014 Belfast Statement.

The seed for the Belfast Statement was planted at the European Society for Mental Health and Deafness (ESMHD) Congress in Bad Ischl, Austria in 2003. The Bad Ischl Declaration, a call from the Congress to recognise sign languages across Europe, strove for better access to mental health care and general health services for Deaf people.

Following Bad Ischl was the 6th World Congress on Mental Health and Deafness in Belfast in 2014, organised by the ESMHD in collaboration with the Royal College of Psychiatrists (NI) and Queen's University Belfast. The theme of the Congress was Pathways to Rights.

The ESMHD was determined to produce a Deaf-led Statement, with reference being made to the Bad Ischl Declaration. A draft Statement was drawn up in close consultation with Deaf people which reflects their first-hand knowledge of the issues they face in mental health care. One goal of the draft was to recognise, accept and respect an individual's preferred means of communication. Michael Schwartz, an eminent lawyer from the United States, who is himself Deaf, oversaw the final draft.

The right to effective communication access in the health care setting, including mental health care, is enshrined in key international Declarations such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Drawing on the CRPD, the Belfast Statement underlines the right to effective communication access in mental health care for Deaf, late deafened, hard of hearing and Deafblind people of all ages.

The Statement has an impressive list of organisational endorsements, including the WFD, ESMHD, the British Deaf Association, Sense/Sense International, and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. Mary McAleese, former President of Ireland, and Liisa Kauppinen, Hon President of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and 2013 UN Human Rights Awardee, both endorsed the Belfast Statement.

It was Dr, Liisa Kauppinen who presented the first draft of the Statement at the World Congress. She encouraged the Statement to be released and distributed to stakeholders concerned with mental health, including the WHO. In her view, the

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Statement contains what is the basis of Deaf identity,; need to respect Sign Language and Deaf Culture from the beginning. She said that it is the responsibility of Governments to promote access to services in sign languages and they should be reminded of their duties regularly.

She also said “I want to live in a world where mental health services and information about these services are provided in sign language so as to make them accessible to the Deaf community.”

I would like to share some of the actions taken to promote the Belfast Statement.

- \* In 2019 the Belfast Statement was launched at a mainstream European Conference on Mental Health in Belfast. The organisers of the Conference were keen to increase the awareness of mental health care for Deaf people through their global network.

- \* Framed Belfast Statements have been presented to Deaf organisations/groups and mental health services providers across the island of Ireland. They have been placed in prominent locations so that they can be seen and read. The framed Statement is also being used to inform those involved in policy and planning of services. There are plans to present a framed Statement to the incoming Northern Ireland Minister for Communities when I return home. Funding for this initiative has come from the Department for Communities, a NI government department.

- \* The Belfast Statement has been translated into International Sign Language. This video version also includes subtitles and voice over in English. It can be accessed on website. A video version of the Statement is being translated into British Sign Language, Irish Sign Language and American Sign Language.

In closing, I have a message from the Northern Ireland Mental Health Champion, Professor Siobhan O’Neill, who was appointed by the Northern Ireland Health Minister to oversee a 10-year Mental Health Strategy. Professor O’Neill says,

“It is absolutely vital that people who are Deaf, hard of hearing, late deafened and Deafblind have effective and timely mental health care, and psychological support delivered in a context of compassion and respect. The Belfast Statement on Mental Health and Deafness sets out the features of the specialist services that are effective and acceptable to these communities. It is essential, as we implement Northern Ireland’s Mental Health Strategy, that we make the vision a reality.”

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I believe the Belfast Stat~~ement~~emention sets out rights that are enshrined in key Declarations. It is an important legacy from the Sixth World Congress in Belfast. It is recommended to anyone involved in policy, planning, and mental health provision.

Thank you.