2020-2023 - The Sections’ Triennium: a personal account by Thomas G. Schulze, WPA’s Secretary for Scientific Sections

Actions speak louder than words.

I would like to share glimpses of some of the actions that took place over the past six years but before I display this footage I would like to remind myself and others who will soon determine the future of our association that the same motto applies to every item on our association’s agenda: starting with accepting diversity in actions not words, raising funds, reaching out to those in need, maintaining high ethical standards regardless of the secondary gains and choosing the benefit of the group over personal legacy.

That said, I think that leading and further developing the Sections has been an invaluable exercise in strategic decision making, logistics, and group work!

Kindly find below snapshots highlighting the orchestration of the group and reminders of the goals that have already been achieved as promised during my tenure as Secretary for Scientific Sections since 2017.

And now I am asking for your trust one more time to take our work to the next level.

- A new uniform internet presence has given the Sections a more appealing and informative appearance (see “Affective Disorders” for illustration)
We have created a system whereby Section can now submit changes to their website using a personalized link. This streamlines the process of updating a Section’s website.

Similarly, the Sections are now provided with a web-based form to submit their triennial activity report to the SfS, needed for their reinstatement.

These measures have helped the Sections develop a corporate identity and have allowed them to work more efficiently.
The 2020-2023 triennium saw the final roll-out of the *Education, Science, Publication, and Research Initiative (ESPRI)*, a vehicle to jumpstart research projects in low- and middle-income countries, with the WPA providing seed funding to (preferably) early career investigators for carrying out scientific projects of relevance to their respective country or region and for which funding would be difficult to obtain otherwise. The ESPRI was initially conceptualized by the SfS, co-developed with the Secretaries for Publications and Education, and approved by the EC in the prior triennium. To date, the WPA has funded six projects from around the globe, addressing a variety of issues: major depression in old age (Tanzania); psychological impact of Ebola and COVID-19 (Liberia); genomics of bipolar disorder (Nigeria); poverty alleviation for persons with mental health problems (Pakistan); transdiagnostic and transcultural web-based psychotherapeutic tools (Pakistan); and development of training tools for the examination and documentation of the psychological sequela of torture and war (UK, Austria and Syria).

In the past three years, I have had the honor and pleasure to organize two Thematic Congresses:

- “Psychological Trauma: Global Burden on Mental and Physical Health”, held virtually in December 2020 ([https://www.wpathematic.org/Newsletters/vol1-apr20.html](https://www.wpathematic.org/Newsletters/vol1-apr20.html); originally conceptualized as an in-person meeting in Athens);
- “New Horizons in Psychiatric Practice: Creative Ideas and Innovative Interventions”, taking place in Malta in November 2022 ([https://www.erasmus.gr/microsites/1253](https://www.erasmus.gr/microsites/1253)).

These two conferences introduced a truly novel concept, as they were not only thematic by focusing on a specific scientific topic, but also by making the intersectional aspect a theme in and of itself. Requiring symposia to be submitted by at least two Scientific Sections helped foster an interdisciplinary spirit benefiting the work of the individual Sections and of the WPA as a whole. The Malta congress featured a panel discussion on mental health parity, with a major emphasis on the patients’/carers’ perspective.
Officers of some of the Sections helping make the Malta meeting a great success.

Post-pandemic scientific exchange and networking brought to you by the WPA Sections!
The past triennium has seen a major upick in WPA’s direct research involvement, as the Association has been awarded principal investigator status in two large European Union Horizon research grants, with the SfS taking the lead in the grant submission process, aided by the Section on Genetics in Psychiatry. So far, the WPA has been awarded principal investigator status in two consortia:

- the PSY-PGx Consortium, focusing on the implementation of pharmacogenetics in psychiatry (www.PSY-PGx.org)
Discussing state-of-the-art research and its impact on clinical psychiatry: courtesy EU research funds to the WPA and our Sections!
For the two projects combined, the WPA will be receiving more than 300,000 US$ over the next five years, which will be used to conceptualize and implement a framework for education and dissemination for the two research consortia. This research work will be jointly coordinated by the Executive Committee and several Sections in whose remit the research involved falls. In both grants, WPA will work closely with the Global Alliance of Mental Illness Advocacy Networks-Europe (GAMIAN-Europe; https://www.gamian.eu/), a not-for-profit patient-driven pan-European organization, hence further developing WPA’s mission of promoting “trialogue”.

So far, educational sessions funded through this grant have been held at the WPA Regional Congress in Kolkata, West Bengal (April 2023), the WPA Thematic Meeting in Abu Dhabi (May 2023), and the WPA Regional Meeting in Yerevan, Armenia (June 2023).

PSY-PGx funds were also used to support a training day for young Ukrainian and Polish psychiatrists on Aug 30th, taking place in Kraków, Poland.

The SfS has furthermore facilitated a WPA involvement in the submission of

- a NIH project on nosology in bipolar disorder (together with Melvin McInnis of the Section on Genetics)
- an EU project on climate change and old age, spearheaded by the Section on Old Age Psychiatry (Carlos de Mendonça Lima & Liat Ayalon)
- Wellcome Trust project on PSY-PGx in LAMIC (together with Roos van Westrhenen of the Section on Genetics)
Honoring my promise to boost the visibility of our early career members, I helped facilitate the conceptualization and implementation of the WPA Exchange Program, a signature project of the Early Career Psychiatrists Section (https://worldpsychiatryexchangeprogram.wordpress.com/).

What would WPA be without its early career colleagues?! Thanks so much to the Early Career Psychiatrists Section for so many joint projects, innovative thinking, and for allowing me to be part of their fun activities (here: Bangkok 2022).

Following the success of the collaboration with the British Journal of Psychiatry, which produced a special issue on trauma-related topics in early 2020 (https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-british-journal-of-psychiatry/disasters-and-trauma-themed-issue), in the last triennium, I have worked with other Sections or individuals to produce other special issues. So far, the following special issues have been (or are in the process of being) published:

- Special issue of the *Journal of Affective Disorders* in collaboration with the WPA Section on Immunology and Psychiatry, guest-edited by Angelos Halaris (in print)
- Special issue of the *Journal of Technology in Behavioral Science* in collaboration with the Section on Informatics & Telecommunications in Psychiatry (proposed new name: Digital Mental Health) on “Global Digital Mental Health Care: Evidence, Implementation, Guidelines and Policy” ([https://www.springer.com/journal/41347/updates/24010078](https://www.springer.com/journal/41347/updates/24010078)), with Davor Mucic and Thomas G. Schulze as guest editors from WPA
- Special issue of *Frontiers in Psychiatry* in collaboration with the WPA Section on Psychological Consequences of Torture and Persecution, guest-edited by Thomas Wenzel (in preparation)

When I took office at the end of 2017, WPA’s twitter account was rarely visited, with a limited followership. In partnership with Kenes (for meeting-related tweets), and the Early Career Psychiatrists Section, the SfS made Twitter a major social media platform for WPA, promoting our mission and engaging with the global psychiatric community at-large. As of September 14th, our Twitter account is followed by 8,124 followers. Our followership is growing steadily. To illustrate, since January 1st, 2023, we have added 1162 followers.
We are followed by individuals and organizations alike. Our global reach is illustrated by the fact that in addition to many of our member societies, we are followed by institutions like the NIMH which have a large followership but only follow a select group of accounts.

At the recommendation of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the Early Career Psychiatrists Section, we have now started a partnership with the social media platform “The Mental Elf” which will help us promote our activities at the upcoming WCP in Vienna and, if proven successful, beyond that event.
In summary, I would like to say that having worked with and for the Sections over the past two triennia has been a highlight of my professional life. It has immensely widened my horizon, teaching me so many new things about our amazing field. I am very happy that the Sections are not only WPA’s backbone - which taken by itself is already a very important aspect - but have evolved to become its motor of innovation. The last three years have truly showcased this innovative power. This is why I think that the 2020-2023 triennium may rightly be called the “Sections’ Triennium”.

When the 141 WPA Member Societies will meet in Vienna, Austria in September 2021 for the 21st World Congress of Psychiatry, they will also convene for the WPA General Assembly, taking place every three years. This assembly, the Association’s highest decision-making body, will vote on a multidisciplinary motion brought to the floor and meant to govern the Association for the next triennium. Reflecting on what has been achieved in the past three years, the Assembly will decide on the future overall course and plan of action. A large part of this decision-making will be dedicated to the work of WPA Scientific Sections by the 2017 General Assembly in Berlin for two terms, the 2017-2020 and the 2020-2023 triennia. These two triennia have seen a consolidation of the activities of the Sections: they have proven to be true to their calling, that is, being the Association’s scientific backbone.

In addition to this, over the past six years, the WPA has made a variety of logistic and technical efforts to improve and streamline the communication of the various Sections with each other and with the Association’s other bodies. This has helped spur a high number of interactional activities, such as symposia at WPA congresses, research projects, and publications.

The past two triennia have seen two major intersectional thematic conferences: on “Psychological Trauma: Global Burden on Mental and Physical Health”, held virtually in December 2020, and on “New Horizons in Psychiatric Practice: Creative Ideas and Innovative Interventions”, taking place in Malta in November 2022. These two conferences introduced a truly novel concept, as they were not only thematic but also in a specific scientific topic, but also by making the intersectional aspect a theme in and of itself. Requiring symposia to be submitted by at least two Scientific Sections helped foster an interdisciplinary spirit benefitting the work of the individual Sections and of the WPA as a whole. Special issues on trauma and stress, published in collaboration with the British Journal of Psychiatry family of journals, have been another testament to the collaborative intersectional spirit. This spirit is truly palpable among the well over 100 members of WPA’s Section of Early Career Psychiatrists. Over the past two triennia, the leadership of this Section has been able to organize numerous symposia, as well as formal and informal gatherings at WPA congresses, and a large number of standalone activities all over the globe, with the recently established WPA Exchange Program being a signature project.

Furthermore, at our recommendation, the WPA Executive Committee bolstered its commitment to early career investigators in low- and middle-income countries by introducing the Education, Science, Publication, and Research Initiative (ESPRI), aimed at jumpstarting scientific projects in these countries.

Finally, the past triennia have seen a major uptick in WPA direct research involvement, as the Association has been awarded principal investigator status in two large European Union Horizon research grants: the PVN-PCs Consortium, focusing on the implementation of pharmacogenomics in psychiatry (www.ppv-chs.org/PSN-PCs), and the PsychoSTRATify network, aimed at the identification of biological and clinical markers predicting resistance to pharmacological treatment approaches. For the two projects combined, the WPA will be receiving more than 300,000 USD over the next five years, which will be used to conceptualize and implement a framework for education and dissemination for the two research consortia. This research work will be jointly coordinated by the Executive Committee and several Sections in whose remit the research involved falls.

In summary, the last two triennia have seen a consolidation of the Sections as the scientific backbone of the WPA. They have served as the mediators and multipliers of the Association’s educational and scientific mission and have taken it to all corners of the world. Having voted the Sections for their activities and effective contribution to WPA’s Action Plan and having put in place measures to increase their global diversity, the Association can now count not only on a solidified backbone but on a veritable motor of innovation in psychiatric research, education, and care for years to come.

Thomas G. Schulte
WPA Secretary for Scientific Sections


In the world, many of whom have become very close friends. I will be forever grateful for 6 wonderful years of working together with such a great group of people. Being as global and diverse as it
gets, this group has truly achieved a lot and has helped promote WPA’s mission whenever and wherever called to action.

Scenes from the life of the Sections: in-person, virtual, and hybrid!
Finally, I would like to thank all the bodies of the WPA for 6 years of great collaborative work. Without the strong support of our member societies, the Executive Committee, the Board, and the Council, the work of the Sections would not have been possible. I would like to extend particular thanks to our President Afzal Javed and his predecessors Helen Herrman, Dinesh Bhugra, Mario Maj, Juan Mezzich, and Norman Sartorius for sharing their wisdom and experience with me in all those years that I have been involved with WPA, starting with my first steps as fellow at the World Congress in Hamburg in 1999.

Thank you all so much!
Yours sincerely,

Thomas J. Schulze