

The intake and the treatment in Villa Maraini during the COVID pandemic

When the covid pandemic started I was very much afraid for myself and my patients, but to my surprise only a very limited number of drug users contracted the virus. However they asked me whether the treatment will continue: in Villa Maraini we never consider closing but it was necessary to find a new way of treatment.

During the covid pandemic, when according to Government stringent rules, people were not allowed to go out but they were requested to stay at home and move only for very serious health reasons or situations of proven necessity, many of our clients were unable to come to our center consequently we were obliged to temporarily reduce the working hours of some services: for example the daily drop in centre closed at 3 p.m. instead of 9 p.m. and the street unit had suspended the activities on Saturday and Sunday.

This has caused a temporary decrease in the number of clients attending Villa Maraini.

For outpatient treatment programmes psychological consultations were organized online, through video calls.

Each psychologist/therapist maintained contacts with his patients scheduling weekly live video sessions of one hour with each person and weekly live video group sessions also with the families.

The main difficulty for a therapist was the lack of direct contact with the patients. It is very important the face to face consultation because the therapist can read even the non-verbal communication of the person. The body language tells you a lot about the emotional state of the patient.

Anyway the consultations online were possible for drug users who were in the program for many months and they were well known to the therapist.

On the contrary the psychological therapy was very difficult for patients who were coming to the services for the first time because the physical distance made it more complicated to establish an empathic relationship.

The drug users who have just started the treatment program or are taking methadone are still in the condition of vulnerability and are the ones most at risk of relapsing.

The drug users generally don't trust the others, they are afraid of being judged and discriminated, upon it is very important to create a welcoming and a pleasant atmosphere during the first meetings.

For the above reasons, during the lockdown our outpatient clinic was always opened and the outpatients services had a live and direct intake of patients.

In this critical emergency situation, which requires movement restriction and limitations, in order to help our patients through a direct contact, we use face masks, hand sanitizer and regular sanitization of premises.

We were opened everyday for everybody because as the airplane pilot James Thain wrote *"the difference between the impossible and the possible is merely a measure of man's determination"*.