

## THE FIRST NORDIC EATING DISORDER SOCIETY CONFERENCE TO BE HELD IN FINLAND BROUGHT CLINICIANS, RESEARCHERS AND PATIENTS TOGETHER

From September 21st to 23rd 2016, Finland had the honour of hosting the 11th Nordic Eating Disorder Society (NEDS) conference. The biannual conference was held in the heart of Helsinki, and was organised for the first time by the Finnish Eating Disorder Society. Almost 300 participants from all the Nordic countries joined forces to enhance the treatment of eating disorders.

It was an unexpected scene. An old lecture hall full of researchers and clinicians walking around with post-it notes on their foreheads. Just moments before, at the beginning of their talk *"Who do we think they are? Confronting myths in the treatment of eating disorders"*, Johanna Levallius and Kjersti Gulliksen, both psychologists and researchers, had challenged us to think more closely about our own conceptions of eating disorders. They had specifically asked us to think of the first word that came to our minds when thinking of eating disorders, and to write it down on the post-it note. The next step was to stick the note to one's forehead and then walk around to display it, and to read what others had written.

It was a simple exercise, but few could have been as well suited for the occasion. After all, we were at a conference where the main theme was eating disorders, and the misconceptions relating to them.

### DISPELLING MYTHS AND PREJUDICES RELATING TO EATING DISORDERS

Mental illnesses are plagued with misconceptions, and eating disorders are no exception. Myths, prejudices and biased media coverage influence the picture of eating disorders, and these are harmful when they stand in the way of proper treatment for sufferers.

During the three days spent in Helsinki, people from different countries and backgrounds came together to share their views on the subject and to enhance the treatment of eating disorders.

"I'm especially pleased with the fact that we have the three pillars of eating disorders here - the clinicians, researchers and the people who utilise our services," said David Clinton, an Associate Professor of Medical Psychology at the Karolinska Institute, and guest speaker of the conference.

The theme was covered from many perspectives, and the line-up was impressive.

On the first day, Clinton and Pia Charpentier, CEO of the Finnish Centre for Eating Disorders, discussed the myths and misconceptions pertaining to treatment at their talk *"What does evidence-based treatment mean for reality-based practice?"* The second day was reserved for the myths and misconceptions relating to the patient. We heard a presentation from the distinguished Professor of Eating Disorders Cynthia Bulik, who talked about the science behind *The Nine Truths About Eating Disorders*, concentrating on genomics and gut microbiota's role in eating disorders. Furthermore, we had the presentation from Levallius and Gulliksen, and a small study was conducted based on our post-it note answers, which will be published later. We also had workshops arranged by the Nordic Interest Groups and scientific and poster presentations.

On the third day, we discussed the myths and misconceptions pertaining to compulsion and coercion. Jorunn Sundgot-Borgen, Professor of Physical Activity and Sport at the Department of Sports Medicine

at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, and Solfrid Bratland Sanda, Associate Professor at Telemark University College, discussed eating disorders, exercise and athletes with eating disorders. In addition, we had clinical workshops on different treatment methods and therapeutic approaches before finally, Jørgen Herlofson, a psychiatrist and senior supervisor at the Department of Psychiatry at Uppsala University Hospital, talked about the history of coercion in psychiatry.

The theme of the conference was in many ways timely. Just over a year ago, *The Nine Truths* was published to increase public awareness and understanding of eating disorders and to end the dissemination of misinformation about the typical sufferer and their family. Furthermore, one of the goals of the first World Eating Disorders Action Day, held in June this year, was to advance understanding of eating disorders and embrace diversity. The 11th NEDS conference was therefore part of a continuum designed to dispel myths and prejudices relating to eating disorders.

#### LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

Many attendees thanked the program for being versatile and for broadening their own understanding.

"I think that one really important aspect is to hear all these different perspectives about microbiota and then some psychological aspects. For example, the debate on the first day was interesting to get different perspectives and a broad picture of this area, because it is not black and white," said Emma Forsén, a graduate student at the Karolinska Institute.

"It was really interesting to hear about what is researched nowadays. I really liked the fact that the speakers and researchers could come to a clinician's level," added Merja Ruhala, a clinician at the Finnish Centre for Eating Disorders.

"I've been in this field for a couple of years and I have never worked clinically, so it is interesting for me to hear what and how clinicians talk about and what they ask about," explained Elin Monell, psychologist and graduate student at the Karolinska Institute.

But it was not only the clinicians' and researchers' ideas and insights we had the pleasure of hearing. Throughout the conference, the patients' voice was also represented, and we had the opportunity to hear touching personal stories from the likes of Carrie Arnold and Suvi Markus.

It was also the first time that a new organisation, The Nordic Association for a Society Without Eating Disorders (NORSED), had held a workshop at a conference. NORSED was founded almost a year ago by four eating disorder patient groups from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Its aim is to become the same kind of umbrella organisation for those whose life has been touched by eating disorders as NEDS is for eating disorder clinicians and researchers.

David Clinton, who is also board chairman of the Swedish patient advocacy group Frisk & Free, said that the first task for the new organisation was to exchange ideas and practices that the four eating disorder patient groups have. In future, he hopes that NORSED can also contribute for example to the discussion of how to define recovery from eating disorders.

#### TAKING THE CONFERENCE TECHNOLOGY TO THE NEXT LEVEL

To fortify the conference experience, organisers had put special emphasis on the use of technology and social media.

"We were amazed when we saw the conference trailer in Stockholm two years ago. We had not seen anything like that before," said the former chairperson of the Nordic Eating Disorder Society, Mette Waadegaard.

Using a trailer was only the beginning. Early on, the Finnish Eating Disorder Society asked the guest speakers to blog on the conference website. For the first time, the NEDS conference also had its own Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts. In addition, all posters were in electronic format. There were some difficulties with the electronic posters, but Rasmus Isomaa, a new chairman of NEDS, sees the development optimistically.

"Electronic posters give the researchers new opportunities and ways to present their work. To ensure that potential difficulties could be solved in advance, they should be sent well before the poster session," he concluded.

#### BEING PART OF THE FAMILY

The conference took place in the Helsinki Congress Paasitorni, located on Siltasaari, near to central Helsinki. The beautiful granite building, built in 1908, has been carefully restored to deal with present-day requirements. The venue had a historical feel, and the facilities were well suited to the occasion.

But it wasn't only the building that made an impression - it was the atmosphere as a whole.

"There is a warm and very accepting type of atmosphere. You can leave the prestige at the door and you can come in with all your questions, uncertainties and fears. You can talk about things and you can find new directions. It makes this a very meaningful conference," said Clinton on the last day of the conference.

"You feel like you are part of a family", he added.

The atmosphere was also warm and excited at the gala dinner on the second evening of the conference. We witnessed a truly great performance from Michael Monroe and danced together through the evening.

#### SEE YOU IN REYKJAVIK

The NEDS general assembly was held during the last day of the conference. Iceland was accepted as a full member of NEDS, which meant all the Nordic countries had finally joined forces to enhance the treatment of eating disorders.

It was also decided that the Icelandic Eating Disorder Association would host the next NEDS conference, which will be held in Reykjavik from September 12th to 14th 2018. The exciting theme of the conference will be Eating Disorders versus Healthy Lifestyle. The big questions are these: Where do we draw the line between healthy diets, weight changes, exercise and pathology? How can clinicians and researchers guide patients on these matters? In addition, the conference will focus on how sociocultural factors influence the presentation of eating disorders, and the key roles that social and family factors play in recovery.

At the beginning of the conference, Isomaa emphasised: "Making connections is the most important thing in this kind of conference. If there would be one thing that I would like to say to the attendees it's this: Meet new people and exchange ideas."

Hope you did just that and had a wonderful time in Helsinki. Looking forward to seeing you in Reykjavik!