

## Testimony – Bruxelles 16.01.2018

Before I start, I would like to apologise because I have not practiced English since a long time. Please don't hesitate to interrupt me if anything I say is not clear enough. I would also like to thank the organisers for their invitation to share my personal experience. I have shared my testimony as part of the study "Mapping and Understanding Exclusion" but did not know then that this would lead me to speak here today.

My name is Sabrina Palumbo from France and I'm 36 years old. I suffered from Anorexia-Bulimia from my 17 to 30 years. It started with a diet that I followed while I practiced athletics at national level. I published a book in 2014 about my chaotic journey, including various hospitalisations and a long recovery, after one year of involuntary placement. This period dates back to 2006-2007.

This long confinement has nothing to do with a "classic" treatment of anorexia. Anorexia does not always lead to extreme situations as in my case, on the other hand my story is quite revealing of the problems that we can meet in mental health care.

Coming back to my experience of forced hospitalisation, I was hospitalised in the general psychiatry department at Issy les Moulineaux where things did not go so well and the doctors contacted my parents saying that I was not manageable and thus in danger. To give an example, the fact that the meal times were difficult for me and that I left the hospital without authorisation just to go to have a coffee led the medical services to put in my record that I was "at risk of escaping and of acting out".

I was then transferred to the Paul Guiraud psychiatric hospital close to Paris at the request of the doctors and of my father (important to note is that if my father had not signed for it the doctors intended to ask the relevant authorities for a forced hospitalisation), I was weighing between 30 and 35 kgs. Later during my hospitalisation I lost even more in weight and at 27 kg my life was really in danger - that's why I was "saved by force".

Looking back, I think that when I was forcibly hospitalised in early summer 2006 this was because I was considered suicidal. However, I had never thought of taking my own life. Those ideas only came after the hospitalisation that "saved" me.

How was it at the hospital?

I was the only patient with anorexia in the ward and I did not adhere to the treatments. Actually, I did not understand what I was doing there, and I was in denial. This led to adding further restrictions on me at the end of the summer. The psychiatrist in charge put me in a pyjamas and locked me in a so called "observation room" with isolation measures. This was a room of a few square meters only with a big metal curtain that the nurses lifted from time to time to observe me, a bit like a caged animal. I remained there until the end of my admission - from the end of the summer to the month of March or April. There I truly remained confined and occasionally I was restraint as well, because the nurses put a nasogastric tube which I ripped off at first because I did not want it. Therefore, to stop me from ripping the tube away - at least that is what I was told - they attached me to the bed.

During several months I had no personal items, I did not have the right to see my family and dear ones, I had no access even to the toilets but had to have a chamber pot.

If I had more time, I could tell you a lot about what I saw, heard and experienced. I could tell you about when four or five people came into my room, kept me by force in bed and forcibly attached the nasogastric tube before leaving without almost saying a word.

Or I could tell you about the time when the nurse dragged me by the hair in the hallway after a blood test because I did not go back to the observation room fast enough.

I could speak about many unreal “scenes” which are difficult to talk about.

What I prefer to tell you about is what I denounce. I have filed an appeal against the hospital for inhuman and degrading treatment. The goal is not so much to help myself to fully heal but more to prevent anything similar happening again to anyone else. If I testify it's because I am convinced that there is a much better way to do things than to isolate a person with anorexia within 4 walls, to tie him or her up and to forcibly feed him or her to prevent him or her from dying.

Whatever will be the outcome of this process, what is important for me to say is that patients also have rights and have the right to speak out and be heard. They obviously have the right to be respected and properly informed and be a part of the decision-making about their own life and health.

What I deplore is the banalisation or trivialisation in France of the so-called “last resort” methods such as isolation and restraint, which should really be used as a last resort and only used under very strict and properly controlled conditions.

I do understand that the “hard methods” used may have saved my life but at what price?

When I came out of the hospital, I was nothing. I was “recovered” in the eyes of people just because I had gained some weight. But I had lost trust in the health care and still today, ten years later, I have a scar on my wrist and I can still describe the bars at the window of my observation room and the cracks in the ceiling.

If I have to summarise anorexia, it's everything except a weight problem. It's a problem of connections. In other words, depriving an anorexic person of the presence of human warmth is certainly not helping him or her to get better.

My testimony is an invitation to challenge the current health care system and calls for a paradigm shift towards more user participation and cooperation between care givers and care receivers.

What I expect from the report presented today is that it will provide a more accurate view of the reality and help raise awareness.

Finally, eating disorders is a form of survival rather a desire to die. Still it takes 15 000 lives every year – although many do recover and that is important to stress.

I believe it may have been harder for me to heal from the trauma of the hospitalization rather than from the anorexia itself.

Thanks for your attention and if you have any questions don't hesitate!

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