

Honoring Professor Norman Sartorius at 90: A Legacy of Transforming Global Psychiatry

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Professor Norman Sartorius, a distinguished psychiatrist and one of the most influential figures in global psychiatry, celebrates his 90th birthday on January 28, 2025. Born in Münster, Germany, on January 28, 1935, Professor Sartorius has dedicated his life to advancing mental health worldwide. His remarkable career includes serving as Director of the Mental Health Division at the World Health Organization (1977–1993), President of the World Psychiatric Association (1993–1999), and President of the European Psychiatric Association (1999–2002). These leadership roles have allowed him to shape mental health policy, research, and education on a global scale.

Renowned for his advocacy, Professor Sartorius has been a champion for reducing stigma associated with mental disorders and improving access to mental health care. His efforts have positively impacted individuals and communities worldwide. Professor Sartorius has held professorial positions at prestigious universities, authored hundreds of publications in psychiatry, and provided mentorship to generations of mental health professionals.

In celebration of his 90th birthday, Professor Sartorius has graciously agreed to participate in an exclusive interview for the WPA e-journal *Education and Psychiatry*. This feature includes nine questions carefully prepared by the WPA Committee on Education and Scientific Publications, focusing on his reflections about psychiatry, education, and more. Marking nine decades of life and contributions, this interview serves as both a tribute to his remarkable journey and an opportunity to share his enduring wisdom with the global mental health community.

1. How did growing up during wartime (WW2) and facing hardship influence your outlook on life and your future career?

During the years of the WW2 which we spent in the forest with the resistance movement – we have learned that the most important thing for survival is being with people whom you trust and on whom you can rely. This belief stayed with me and throughout my time and I have based my work on close relations with people who could trust me and whom I could trust; and I have seen that mutual trust is more important for success than any other factor, including regulations, written promises and documents, ease of obtaining resources, harmony with government or institutional rules.

2. How did your mother's role as a pediatrician influence your decision to pursue medicine and shape your career choices?

My mother was an extraordinary paediatrician – not only was she an excellent clinician but she also believed in public health and fought for mother and child welfare on the public health level. I was attracted to paediatrics but finally decided to take another specialty because I felt that I shall at best



become known as a capable son of a great paediatrician rather than recognized for my own work and contributions. I have however been inspired by my mother's conviction of the importance and omnipresence of public health aspects of all branches of medicine, including particularly strongly the discipline of psychiatry.

3. You have published many papers in some of the world's most prestigious journals. What was your first paper and what is your favorite paper?

My first paper reported the effects of using a psychotropic medication in the treatment of people suffered from schizophrenia. The use of medications as the main form of treatment of mental illness made us, at the time, feel that we can treat patients like other doctors do rather than primarily serve as guardians of people with disordered behaviour. My favourite paper was the report of the findings of the first large international study of mental disorder - schizophrenia which I was coordinating at the World Health Organization. The study showed that people in different parts of the world, belonging to different cultures and living their lives differently suffer from the same diseases, react to the same treatment; it also showed that large scale international collaboration in psychiatry is possible and can be fruitful. The study underlined the importance of public health approaches in psychiatry and thus opened another important area of work for public health authorities.

4. You are widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in psychiatry. Is there someone, or perhaps a few people, who have particularly influenced the way you think about mental health?

As anyone in our field I have been trained by professors who taught me psychiatry – many of them I admired but I was and am inspired by carers – people who live with relatives or friends struck by a severe mental illness and provide them with loving care for years on end, often sacrificing their own life to help them live a life that is liveable.

5. What do you consider the most transformative innovation in mental health during your career, at least to date and what is the most exciting thing you see ahead?

Psychiatry has been changing over the years and many changes in psychiatry have been reflections of the changes in society. As far as single events are concerned I believe that the introduction of effective medications in psychiatry was a key change that not only helped patients but also demonstrated that mental illness is an illness amenable to treatment rather than an incurable and evil disposition of individuals who must be removed from society

6. What is the most critical area(s) in which the WPA should focus its efforts in the next decade?

I see three functions of WPA as particularly important.

First, WPA should be the leader in the formulation of ethical rules of behaviour in psychiatry and the guardian of their application in the treatment of mental illness and in the organization of life of people with mental illness in the society.

Second, various other organizations in our field focus on aspects of psychiatry – for example on psychopharmacology – and WPA should attempt to establish links between them and WPA member societies as well as with intergovernmental bodies – thus serving as a hub of a worldwide network of organizations aiming to improve mental health. The WPA specialist sections could serve as bridges between these other organizations and the WPA and, in my opinion, see this function as their main goal. Third, WPA should focus on helping young psychiatrists to learn psychiatry and create possibilities for their inclusion in the many networks which facilitate international collaboration and learning from each other

7. What practices have helped you maintain productive professional longevity?

I believe that three factors contributed to remaining active in our field. First, I liked the work that I was doing throughout the years of my regular employments and therefore did not see the necessity nor had a wish to get into some other field when I left my employment. Second, I was fortunate to have had links and friendships with colleagues in various parts of the world and acquaintances in various professional organizations which were interested in my participation in their work; and third, I took retirement as early as was possible so that I could build a post-retirement engagements while still in good shape. It goes without saying that I was fortunate to have retained ability to work despite of advancing age.

8. You have visited many countries throughout your career. Is there a country/city you've wanted to visit but have not had the opportunity for a visit yet?

This is question which I find difficult to answer— during my employment with the World Health Organization and after that I visited many countries, some of them several times. To my surprise I discovered that on a second and subsequent visits to the “same” country it was no longer the same, it changed in many ways – in habits, appearance, food styles, ways of speaking and working, dressing, political regimes, educational rules, composition of the population, plants and courses of rivers. Thus, I have to say that there are very many countries which I would experience as being new countries, different from each other and well worth a visit. The one country which I have never visited, and about which I have read and which I would like to visit for the first time is Bhutan which according to all accounts is a beautiful and happy place.

9. You and your wife Vera have been together since 1963, sharing an extraordinary partnership. Would you share the role Vera has played in supporting and contributing to your professional achievements?

I do not think that I would have achieved much without my wife Vera, my true partner in dreams and reality. I am convinced that those who are blessed by a true partner live longer, create more and feel better about their life. I am fortunate that we have found each other more than sixty years ago.

Thank you for sharing your insightful answers, Professor Sartorius, and we wish you a very happy birthday.



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