Foreword from the Rector of Semmelweis University

The importance of well–being and good practices at Semmelweis University during the COVID–19 pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic that hit Hungary in 2020 has put the healthcare system to a test we have not seen for decades, and not only in Hungary but all around the world. The unknown nature of the virus presented the initial challenge, followed by organizing protection, the care of the infected, the additional workload due to the rising number of cases, and the mass administration of vaccines. Today, we can say that the pandemic is in decline and we are winning, but this does not mean that we can sit back: post-COVID clinics have been opened in several Semmelweis University institutes and clinics, dealing with the virus' long-term effects. So, the fight against infection is not over; it has just been transformed.

Semmelweis University has been at the forefront of this fight since the virus first appeared in Hungary. On a national level, we have taken a prominent role in PCR testing, patient care, vaccination and scientific research on SARS-CoV-2, while also taking responsibility for providing credible information to the public. Our doctors, nurses, teachers and students served there at screenings, at vaccination points, at the bedside, in the labs – wherever help was needed. Moreover, students have also stood by their studies, because life at Semmelweis University has not stopped during the pandemic: education continued in a hybrid format, and thanks to our curricular reform, which aimed to make education more practice-oriented, a large number of our students were able to start work with confidence, having already gained experience in patient care. From December 2020 to April 2022, 7374 of our students became involved in the fight against COVID-19, working for the National Ambulance Service, in hospitals, clinics or alongside GPs.

However, an epidemic is not only physically but also mentally demanding. The last more than two years have been full of change and insecurity for all of us: most people have had to deal with confinement, isolation, existential dread, lack of access to services. We were unable to live our lives as we used to live them – this in itself causes stress, not to mention fear of the unknown, the pandemic's unpredictability or the fact that crowds have had to face serious, unsolvable difficulties. All of this affected health workers even

more, because the virus existed not just as a threat that in many cases remained invisible, but as a very real enemy that they had to face every day during their work.

That is why we have done everything we can at Semmelweis University to protect the mental health of Semmelweis Citizens, not just their physical health. The strength of our institution lies in our staff and our students – as one of the largest health care providers in the country, our university community is the equivalent of a medium-sized city, and we are all responsible for them. In the weeks following the outbreak of the virus, we had already provided a number of support services to help those serving on the frontline. As part of the Family Friendly University Program, launched in 2019 to support the wellbeing of our citizens, students are helped by the University Counseling Service of our Institute of Behavioral Sciences, while staff are supported by the Employee Advisory Service in the Semmelweis Center for Health Development.

At the University, we confess that as well as healing disease, it remains just as important to maintain health, to engage in prevention – it is no coincidence that we talk about health and not disease. In this spirit, we place a high priority on supporting mental health through psychological skill-building methods, counseling, or the mindfulness and stress management group as an optional course which is also a part of the curriculum. Even indirectly, we support mental health through our Semmelweis Center for Health Development, various sports grants, and the Green University program. These initiatives converge at numerous points to improve our university citizens' well-being . The fact that our university is a founding member of EUniWell (European University Association) – which was established in 2020 and now has eight European higher education institutions; it aims to improve the physical and mental well-being of university students and staff – proves how crucial the well-being of Semmelweis citizens remains to us. In the Times Higher Education (THE) 2021 Impact ranking, Semmelweis stood ranked among the top ten universities of the world in the Health and Well-being category – another sign that we are on the right track.

The COVID-19 pandemic has focused everyone's attention on the health sector – it's important not to forget those working in this area. They are the ones who have chosen one of the most beautiful and difficult professions in the world, one that lasts a lifetime. However, in order for one to really work for the health of others for the rest of one's life, it is essential to look after one's own health – a point made in this present issue of the European Journal of Mental Health published by the Institute of Mental Health at Semmelweis University, which I am particularly pleased to see.

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