Improving the mental health of the population, a strategy for the European Union. Green Paper

2006/2058(INI) - 14/10/2005 - Non-legislative basic document

The Commission has prepared this Green Paper following a WHO European Ministerial Conference on Mental Health in January 2005. During the Conference the European Commission was invited to consider what the most appropriate framework would be for the implementation of a European mental health strategy. The presentation of this Green Paper is a first answer to this invitation.

The Commission notes that the mental health of the EU population can be improved upon considerably. Mental ill health, for example, affects every four citizen, leading in many cases to suicide. Further, mental ill health can result in significant economic, social, judicial and educational burdens. Stigmatisation, discrimination and non-respect for the human rights and dignity of the mentally ill remains pervasive, challenging the core values of the European Union.

In response to these needs this Green Paper proposes to establish an EU strategy on mental health. The strategy would be enacted through a framework for the exchange of best practice as well as acting as an instrument for Member State co-operation in the field of mental ill health. The purpose of the Green Paper is to launch a debate within the European institutions, within Governments, health professional circles, stakeholders, civil society and the research community regarding the relevance of mental health for the EU, the need for a strategy at EU level and its possible priorities.

To put the problem into figures, the Green Paper points out that more than 27% of adult European are estimated to experience at least one form of mental ill health during any one year, with the most common forms of mental ill health in the EU being anxiety disorders and depression. By the year 2020 it is expected that depression will be the highest ranking cause of disease in the developed world. Currently, in the EU some 58 000 citizens dies from suicide every year – more than the annual deaths from road traffic accidents, homicide or HIV/AIDS. Mental ill health costs the EU an estimated 3-4% of GDP through lost productivity.

The mandate for Community action is defined in Article 152 of the EU Treaty which stipulates that a “high level of human health protection shall be ensured in the definition and implementation of all Community policies and activities”. Community intervention in the field of mental health can provide a number of opportunities. For example, the EU is well placed to:

- create a framework for the exchange of co-operation between the Member States
- help increase the coherence of actions in different policy sectors and
- open up a platform for stakeholders such as patient and civil society organisations.

The following activities are foreseen:

- **Creating a dialogue with Member States on Mental Health:** This forum will help facilitate co-operation between the Member States on mental health issues. One objective being to set a core of actions combined with targets, benchmarks, time-lines and a monitoring mechanism. The dialogue should also address the two proposed Council Recommendations on a) the promotion of mental health and b) reducing depression and suicidal behaviour.

- **Launching an EU-Platform on Mental Health:** The purpose of this platform would be to promote cross-sectoral co-operation and consensus on mental health through the involvement of a variety of actors such as policy makers, experts and stakeholders from both the health and non-health sectors. Such a Platform would allow for a closer analysis of mental health, help to identify evidence-based practices, develop recommendations for action and help identify best practice for promoting the social inclusion of those with mental health problems.

- **Developing an interface between policy and research on mental health:** The purpose of this third group will be to engage stakeholders and to set up an indicator system to include information on mental health, its determinants, impact assessment and evidence based practice. It would explore the most effective ways to identify research priorities and to ensure a better interface between data systems, research knowledge and policy-making. Its recommendations could be included in the Action Plan.

In order to help realise an EU strategy on mental health the Commission invites all interested parties to contribute to the preparation of a possible EU-Strategy and an Action Plan on Mental Health by commenting on the Green Paper. A list of questions are posed and include, inter alia, - How relevant is the mental health of the EU's population? Would the development of a comprehensive EU-strategy on mental health add value to the existing and envisaged actions? Are the initiatives being proposed the correct ones in order to foster co-operation between the Member States, to promote the integration of mental health into health and non-health policies?

Contributions should be sent to the Commission by 31 May 2006.