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**ENSURING MENTAL HEALTH IN YOUTH IN MODERN EUROPEAN SOCIETIES  
- Turning the European Pact for Mental Health and Wellbeing into reality –**

European Parliament, Brussels, 3 December 2008

**MHE CONFERENCE REPORT**

On 3 December 2008, Mental Health Europe (MHE) held a debate on “Ensuring Mental Health in Youth in modern European Societies – Turning the European Pact for Mental Health and Wellbeing into Reality” at the European Parliament in Brussels. The event was hosted by Poul Nyrup Rasmussen MEP, former Danish Prime Minister, and Giovanni Berlinguer MEP, member of the Committee for Health and Environment. The event focused on one of the thematic priorities of the European Pact for Mental Health and Wellbeing, namely the mental health of youth. The aim was to foster discussion between representatives from the EU Institutions and key experts on policy perspectives in this field.

The event was opened by the hosting MEPs Poul Ryrup Rasmussen and Giovanni Berlinguer. The two MEPs welcomed the audience to the third debate on mental health that is jointly organised by Mental Health Europe and the European Parliament.

Mr Rasmussen MEP pointed out the problem of isolation that people with mental health problems face, lacking social contacts. He addressed 10 points in his speech and highlighted the importance of creating consistency and coherence in the treatment that people can access across Europe. Sufficient resources for the treatment of people with mental health problems need to be dedicated and ways of knowledge-sharing be developed, such as a collection of best practices and also ways of sharing what does not work and bringing an end to out of date or inappropriate practices (e.g. caged beds, using force, or medicines not used sufficiently or prescribed inappropriately). There is a need to remove the taboos and to create a public dimension to mental health and Mr Rasmussen wishes that one day people talk about mental health problems as they do now about cancer or heart diseases and to treat them with the same importance in politics and to dedicate appropriate resources for mental illnesses. More research on mental health should also be carried out and supported. Different treatments for different forms of mental health problems are necessary. Early treatment, new treatment methods as well as 24-hours systems of care and response should be developed. One should also look at the social dimension and work towards a more systematic inclusion of people with mental health problems into the labour market and society. Mr Rasmussen calls for a setting of benchmarks on how to treat people with mental health problems and their relatives. Families often feel helpless. A more inclusive approach should be adopted which includes families in the treatment of people with mental health problems; they are a resource to help!

In the following Ms Malgorzata Kmita, President of Mental Health Europe, gave a short introductory speech. She highlighted how important human contact, dignity, dialogue and justice are for approaches

in mental health and wellbeing. Young people are citizens of today and need to be recognised as such. Good mental health of tomorrow is created by efficient measures of today.

Mr Jürgen Scheftlein, Policy Officer in charge of mental health at the European Commission's Directorate General for Health, addressed the recent developments in the mental health field at the EU level. He presented the European Pact for Mental Health and Wellbeing as one of the main policy achievements, including a new roadmap, as well as the adopted Council Resolution on the Health of Youth. He pointed out that children and youth are Europe's future, whereas many risks are surrounding them. Half of the mental health problems have their onset in the early years of life. The development of a positive mental health needs to be supported by the provision of social, educational and health help. Mr Scheftlein informed that reports about mental health and related activities in all EU countries have been collected. These also include an inventory of good practices and jointly supported recommendations. Action commitments have been drawn. NGOs as well as other key stakeholders will be increasingly involved in this process. As one major initiative Mr Scheftlein mentioned the cooperation of Commissioner Vassiliou and the European Youth Forum promoting mental health of young people and the prevention of suicide and self-harm through schools and youth work. Finally, he announced four main conferences that will be implemented in the follow-up of the Mental Health Pact:

- July 2009, Brussels: conference on Youth Health hosted by the Commissioner for Health Vassiliou in collaboration with the European Youth Forum
- September 2009, Sweden: thematic conference on Mental Health in Youth and Education organised by the Swedish EU Presidency and the European Commission
- December 2009, Hungary: thematic conference on the prevention of depression and suicide
- First semester 2010, Spain: thematic conference on Mental Health of Older People, organised by the Commission in collaboration with the Spanish EU Presidency

Dr Werner Leixnering, Head of the Department of Youth Psychiatry at the Federal Psychiatric Clinic Wagner-Jauregg in Linz, Austria, explained the measures undertaken in Austria to tackle the risk of mental illness by children and adolescents. After stating on the history of mental health in Austria with a starting point in the Freud and Adler theories, Austria had developed a strategy focused mainly on parent counseling first and then on multidisciplinary work. The early recognition and prevention strategy in Austria is divided in three levels of prevention, including in the first stage the avoidance of some risk factors like poor emotional health or school problems. The main tasks of child and adolescent psychiatry are to focus on early recognition through a developmental diagnosis as well as early treatment through education, counseling and therapy. The Mental Health Action Plan should include three levels of care (primary, secondary and tertiary) according to the Austrian strategy. Austria needs a better coordinated plan for care and prevention, involving the nine Federal states. Special needs of different age groups should be addressed by targeted prevention and care policies for children and young people. Other sectors shall be engaged in early diagnosis and prevention, such as special education and social work beyond medicine. Specific programmes have to be made in Austria including projects for the detection of children and adolescents at higher risk of mental health problems.

Mr Christoffer Gronstad, Bureau Member of the European Youth Forum (EYF), presented the work of the EYF and its recent activities on the health of young people, which focus on key issues such as education, participation, youth work, human rights and social dimension. Christoffer talked about the main factors that may cause mental disorders in young people, including stress and socio-cultural factors. He highlighted that there is a worrying trend that comes from the increasing demands from the formal education system, linked with higher expectations and to the pressure of the combined work, social and student life. The European Youth Forum recommended taking measures in order to better prevent and reduce the risk of poor mental health and wellbeing of young people. Further recommendations have been made in the field of early interventions, reintegration and inclusion of young people suffering from mental health problems. These general recommendations were followed

by more specific advices, such as the call for the implementation of non discrimination policies and the fight against stigma and social exclusion.

Mr Rasmussen MEP added that even though early interventions are complex and difficult to put into place, it is still fundamental to make more joint efforts in this field. He thus called for a stronger role of the parents in the prevention and care process of their children.

A fruitful discussion with the floor took place and was chaired by Mr Gregor Henderson, Mental Health Europe's Advisor and Chair of Young Scotland in Mind. Many relevant comments and remarks were made by the participants addressing the issue of youth mental health from different perspectives:

- The importance of school as key setting where to implement prevention and promotion programmes was stressed. In particular, recommendations were made on the necessity of making mental health services available at school, providing adequate training for teachers and promoting and supporting the participation of children who experience mental health problems.
- It was underlined that in the latest decades a change of paradigm in the disability policies occurred and led to a shift of the focus from the medical to the social model. It was noted that unfortunately a similar change has not taken place yet in the child policies. Emphasis should be shifted from a deficit and disability model to one of ability and capacity, building on children and young people's resilience and life skills.
- The point of view of the mental health users and their families was also considered, as well as the need of empowering and supporting people with mental health problems to fully participate in the drafting and implementation of relevant policies like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of people with disabilities.
- A call for a combined commitment and action from health, social care, education and criminal justice was made. This is key issue, we must move beyond mental health seen primarily or solely as a health or illness responsibility.
- The importance of mental health at work was stressed. Mental health at work should become a priority for companies and employers. More corporate social responsibility in the employment and labour market shall help reaching out to people with mental health problems and to help de-stigmatise mental illness.
- Finally, it was stated that there is an urgent need for more and better emotional and financial support to the families of people living with mental health problems.

Mr Berlinguer MEP closed the event with the suggestion to organise similar raising awareness events on mental health issues in the future. He advocated for a co-ordinated response to the needs of children and young people, which sees their mental health as one aspect and dimension of their lives. He welcomed the European Pact for Mental Health and Wellbeing as one key step into the right direction, but not enough to improve the situation substantially as a lot more needs to be done, in particular in the youth field. He concluded by saying that investing in the social, emotional and psychological wellbeing of our children and young people is of utmost importance. More support to parents and schools should be provided to protect the mental health and promote the mental wellbeing of the younger generations.

*Mental Health Europe,  
Brussels, December 2008*