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## **Open meeting of the MHE Committee on Human Rights and Mental Health Vienna, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2007**

On the second day of Mental Health Europe's Annual Conference, which was organised this year in Vienna (Austria) from Thursday 31 May to Saturday 2 June 2007, an open meeting of the MHE Committee on Human Rights and Mental Health was held with the objective of fostering an interactive and dynamic discussion with all participants around the issue of mental health and human rights. The meeting took place in the frame of Workshop n°1 titled '*Mental health and wellbeing in the society and in the environment of the person with mental health problems. Requirements and general conditions.*'

It gathered stakeholders from different backgrounds and European countries: members of the MHE Committee on Human Rights and Mental Health, experts in the field, mental health service users, representatives of European level and national NGOs, interested third parties etc.

The open meeting:

- addressed the issue of mental health and human rights from a broad perspective and highlighted the achievements and challenges in the protection and promotion of the rights of people with mental and/or physical disabilities at the international, European and national level;
- drew attention to the work carried out by organisations committed to the development of the rights of people with mental health problems;
- focused on the progress and expectations raised by the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

The meeting was chaired by Peter Kinderman, Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Liverpool (UK) and Chair of the MHE Committee on Human Rights and Mental Health. Kinderman welcomed the participants and introduced the MHE Committee on Human Rights and Mental Health, which was set up in 2004 in the framework of the '*Community Action Programme to Combat Discrimination*' (2001-2006). Its purpose is to monitor and assess the human rights situation of people with mental health problems upon request of MHE member associations, help to raise awareness through the formulation of position papers on certain matters that MHE wishes to bring to the attention of policy makers and other stakeholders, as well as support and liaise with other European NGOs active in the field of human rights.

Kinderman also expressed his concern about the general public's and media's misperception of people with mental health problems, who are too often pictured as potentially violent and dangerous persons. He reminded the participants that much remains to be done in this respect.

Kinderman's opening speech was followed by a rich and exhaustive presentation made by Michelle Valentine, Practice Development Officer at the Disability Rights Commission (UK) and member of the MHE Committee on Human Rights and Mental Health. Valentine presented the activities carried out by the DRC, which has the key ambition to achieve '*a society where all disabled people can participate fully as equal citizens*'. Valentine particularly insisted on the work of the DRC Mental Health Action Group, a group set up by users and composed of users who has issued '12 priorities for change'. Among these priorities, particular attention should be paid to access to justice, the right to health and social care services, equality for immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers and tackling discrimination in the media.

Next was a presentation of the Mental Disability Advocacy Center (MDAC) by Oliver Lewis, MDAC Executive Director. Lewis depicted MDAC's main programmes, namely:

- the legal programme, which aims at representing individuals and/or organisations whose rights are violated in strategic cases before domestic and international courts;
- and the policy and advocacy programme, which consists in the drafting of monitoring reports and the release of political recommendations.

MDAC is principally working around three priorities: legal capacity and the issue of guardianship, institutionalisation and ill-treatment, and early death in the institutions. Lewis concluded his presentation with a positive note stemming from the recent adoption of a groundbreaking international treaty on disability.

After him, Peter Kinderman presented the study he conducted upon request of the UK Department for Constitutional Affairs. The focus of the study is on '*The institutionalisation of human rights thinking in public service provision*' and its objectives are twofold: to improve the health service users' condition and to make the concept of human rights more acceptable. The study made clear that an enhanced provision of basic care, based on the principles of fairness, respect, equality and dignity (FRED), should lead to the improvement of the service users' human rights.

Carlotta Besozzi, Director of the European Disability Forum (EDF), was then invited to give some information on the involvement of disability NGOs in the drafting process of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and to present an analysis of the rights and advances for people with mental health problems and people with disabilities in general. She underlined the fact that this new convention applies not only to states, but also directly to organisations and individuals. It contains several key concepts, such as the promotion of equality and the elimination of all forms of discrimination, the right to life, the right to independent and community living and the endorsement of international cooperation. In addition, the convention deals with important mental health issues, for instance equal recognition before the law, the interdiction of cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment or punishment, the right to physical and mental integrity and the prohibition of deprivations of liberty based on the sole ground of disability. The convention has adopted an innovative approach, the '*supported decision making model*', which aims at keeping the individual at the centre of the decision making process and encouraging the development of capacities.

Finally, Pětr Nawka, Chairman of INTEGRA and member of the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Human Rights, introduced the work of this Committee, which is in charge of developing a legal and ethical tool for mental health. The tool will be used as a framework for the development of a patient-based policy which will enable countries to elaborate national action plans dedicated to the improvement of care provision and medical treatment.

The various presentations raised interest and questions from the floor, especially as regards the participation and involvement of users and the issues of guardianship, community care and access to public services.

Since abuses in the mental health field remain patent and recurrent, the workshop also challenged MHE's role when it comes to the promotion and protection of human rights. It was pointed out that MHE's action in this respect should be reinforced, especially its role in awareness-raising. It was deemed essential to impact on the mentalities and change the general public and media's misperception of people with mental health problems. Moreover, international and European cooperation should be further developed and strengthened on a practical basis so as to facilitate exchanges of good practices in the field.

The meeting's outcomes will form a useful basis for the future work and activities of the MHE Human Rights committee.

*Mental Health Europe  
Brussels, June 2007*

*For more information on the open meeting or the work of the MHE Committee on Human Rights and Mental Health, please contact Fanny Muller, Coordinator of the Committee, at the MHE Secretariat: E-mail [fmuller@mhe-sme.org](mailto:fmuller@mhe-sme.org), Tel +32 280 04 68*