

# Mental Health Europe and the European Commission's Peer Review Group

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Mental Health Europe (MHE) was one of the NGO participants to the Peer Review Group [<http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/detail.cfm?ref=1841&l=S>] launched by the European Commission's Directorate General for Health and Consumer Protection (DG Sanco) in 2006 to improve mechanisms for stakeholder participation.

*HSCNews* talks to Mari Fresu, MHE Project Coordinator.

***HSCNews International:*** The Peer Review Group has been trying to work out how to improve the process of stakeholder consultation with DG Sanco. What conclusions has this Group reached?

**Mari Fresu:** "The Peer Review Group has assisted DG Sanco in reviewing its experience as regards stakeholder consultation, trying to identify best practices for, and improvements to, the directorate general's existing consultation system. The Group

## **MENTAL HEALTH EUROPE**

Created in 1985 as the Regional Council of the World Federation for Mental Health, Brussels-based Mental Health Europe (MHE) currently has 72 member organisations in 30 European countries, and 56 individual members. MHE is committed to the promotion of positive mental health, the prevention of mental distress, the improvement of care, and the protection of the human rights of users (and ex-users) of mental health services, their families, and carers.

<http://www.mhe-sme.org>

met four times during 2006, ending its work in December of that year. The Group's activities focused on four main issues: 'Stakeholders and Inequalities'; 'Feedback and Communication'; 'Stakeholder Planning and Resources'; and 'Comitology' [the informal recognition by courts of one jurisdiction of the laws and judicial decisions of another]. Key recommendations within DG Sanco's remit included the establishment of a Stakeholder Reference Group to advise DG Sanco on stakeholder involvement processes (rather than on content); improvements in transparency in both decision-making and data; more and better feedback; and engaging the un-engaged by making greater use of existing networks. Central recommendations falling outside DG Sanco's field of competence concerned the establishment of criteria to ensure a representative stakeholder involvement; the development of tailor-made methods for consultation which respect and adapt to the context of the stakeholders; provision of additional funding to NGOs to ensure a more balanced participation; a more flexible and longer consultation timeframe; improvement of inter-DG coordination,

as well as a more transparent comitology. The findings and the recommendations of the Peer Review Group will be shared and validated at a conference in spring 2007, with the view of involving all DG Sanco stakeholders, other DGs and EU institutions, and experts on public participation. We at MHE see this DG Sanco initiative as an excellent opportunity for NGOs to get

involved in the public debate at EU level, and thus reduce the neglect of the NGO and self-help sector in the EU policymaking process."

**"The findings of the Peer Review Group will be shared at a conference in spring 2007"**

**HSCNews**

**International:**

You say that the NGO sector has been neglected. But things have moved on a lot in the last two years.

How do you see public/patient consultation in mental health?

**Mari Fresu:** "MHE welcomes the public/patient consultation process as a golden opportunity for influencing the discussion of mental health issues at European level. We support the efforts of the European Commission towards better policymaking, which sees legislation as originating from the views and real needs of patients/users. Public consultation involving final users (such

as patients) is crucial to the promotion of a sensible policy framework that starts from where people are at, and which empowers civil society at all levels. Such a refined framework would address patients' needs with a greater level of accuracy."

**HSCNews International:** What concrete progress has been made at EU level to take on board the views of mental health patients and their families?

**Mari Fresu:** "Since 2005, significant steps ahead have been made in the field of mental health, both at EU and at national policy level. MHE has been following this process closely. The development of mental health policies has been linked to the involvement and empowerment of users, families and carers—as stated in the WHO's *Mental Health Action Plan for Europe: Facing the Challenges, Building Solutions* [<http://www.euro.who.int/Document/MNH/edoc07.pdf>], signed on the occasion of the 'WHO European Ministerial Conference on Mental Health', Helsinki, 12th-15th January 2005. One key outcome of the Helsinki meeting was the establishment of the

WHO Europe NGO Empowerment Network [further details at [http://www.eufami.org/index.pl/download/\\_bulletin\\_January\\_2006.pdf](http://www.eufami.org/index.pl/download/_bulletin_January_2006.pdf)]. The main objective of this Network is supporting the WHO's work through capacity building for users and carers, provision of care (in particular the deinstitutionalisation process), and protection of human rights of people with a mental health problem. The Helsinki conference paved the way for the

adoption of the European Commission Green Paper, *Improving the Mental Health of the Population: Towards a Strategy on Mental Health for the European Union*. The Green Paper was formally launched in October 2005, and involved about a hundred delegates (including

representatives of EU Member States, a broad range of stakeholders, and academic experts)."

**HSCNews International:** What is the importance of the Green Paper?

**Mari Fresu:** "This is the first time that mental health is being addressed by the European Commission. DG Sanco

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prepared the Green Paper through inter-service consultation—which means that every Commission unit and Directorate General could give their contribution to the Paper. Also, for the first time ever, the European Commission and the World Health Organization have been working together following their joint preparation for the Helsinki January 2005 conference. From the perspective of patients and civil society, it is

important to stress that the Green Paper on Mental Health is a useful reference for every organisation and individual wanting to ‘knock on the door’ of the EU.

For all these reasons, MHE actively took part in the consultation process, and invited as many organisations and people as possible to have their say and to contribute.

The consultation process closed in May 2006. It will result in the development of a European Commission proposal for an EU Strategy on Mental Health.”

**HSCNews International:** How interested are national EU governments in incorporating patients and their families or carers into public policy?

**Mari Fresu:** “At this stage it is not possible to give a comprehensive answer to this question, as national initiatives on mental health promotion are quite recent, especially in the new Member States. Only recently have some Member States begun developing national action plans for mental health. Although Member States have a range of policies and programmes on mental health, and mental health promotion

appears to be moving up the agenda, the infrastructure and resources to support implementation are often poorly developed. In the January 2005 *WHO Declaration and Action Plan*, the Member States committed themselves to the implementation of mental health-promotion policies and actions (mostly within the context of a

Mental Health National Plan). Within this framework, a number of Member States in Europe introduced the principle of decentralisation of health (including mental health planning), and the devolving of policy, planning and implementation of strategies at the regional/local level. In all, national governments seem to be ever more responsive, both to develop mental health policies and to engage

**“National governments seem to be ever more responsive to develop mental health policies and to engage users”**

users, their families and carers in the design of such policies. MHE would like to see, though, more effort on the part of national governments to involve civil society into the public policy and the decision-making process.”

**HSCNews International:** Is the private sector moving towards a deeper patient involvement in policy?

**Mari Fresu:** “There is not a single movement in the private sector towards promoting patient involvement in policy. But a wide range of NGO actors are busy on the subject at European and national level. Like MHE, several NGOs working in the mental health field at European level have committed themselves to the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing, the prevention of mental disorder, and the fight against stigma and discrimination.”

**HSCNews International:** What future cooperation do you see between the public, patients and policymakers?

**“There is not a single movement in the private sector towards promoting patient involvement in policy”**

**Mari Fresu:** “As recommended in the MHE response to the European Commission consultation on the Green Paper on Mental Health, MHE would welcome the launch of an EU Platform on Mental Health and Well Being. Such

a platform would represent a wide base of interests from numerous stakeholders (including patients, carers, and civil society organisations—many of which are already represented in the Europe-wide and multi-sectoral membership of Mental Health Europe).

Furthermore, policy makers should put in place specific, easily-accessible channels that allow people with experience of mental distress to contribute to the development and implementation of a European/national mental health strategy. The cooperation between the public, patients and policymakers is also taking place through several initiatives at EU level.”

**HSCNews International:** Many thanks.