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NO SOCIAL INCLUSION WITHOUT MENTAL HEALTH

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Mental Health Europe (MHE) together with John Bowis MEP hosted a special event dedicated to the exploration of issues around mental health and mental well-being in the European Union on 13 September 2006 at the European Parliament in Brussels. The event with the title *No Social Inclusion without Mental Health* was attended by MEPs, Council Health Attachés as well as representatives from the European Commission cabinets of Commissioner M. Wallström (Institutional Relations and Communication Strategy) and Commissioner V. Spidla (Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities).

The event was chaired by John Bowis, MEP (Group of the European People's Party – Christian Democrats – and European Democrats, United Kingdom). Bowis is the author of a report based on the European Commission Green Paper on Mental Health, which was unanimously adopted on 13 July 2006 by the European Parliament's Committee on Environment, Public health and Food Safety.

In his opening speech, Bowis underlined that the Green Paper on Mental Health should be warmly welcomed and endorsed since it represents the very first attempt, at the European level, to tackle the burden of mental illness and give mental health a high priority on the European political agenda. However, there is also still a long way to go. Difficult decisions will have to be made and audacious actions will have to be undertaken if we want to divert more political attention and financial resources to mental health.

Bowis expressed that even though the importance of the prevention of mental distress should not be denied, it is essential to help and cure when mental health problems occur. Therefore, he continued, we have to primarily improve the quality of mental health services, which is sometimes still very poor. We have to set up services that we can feel comfortable with. Member States should be urged to invest more in appropriate services such as secure establishments, the treatment of serious mental illness, long-term treatment, and care in the community and at home.

Malgorzata Kmita, President of MHE, presented the keynote speech of the evening. She highlighted that mental health problems can affect all of us at different stages in life, but that it appears to be the case that those people experiencing the most stressful social and economic environments are most adversely affected and most susceptible to mental ill-health and mental dis-ease. The situation is exacerbated by the popular misconception that mental illness is a sign of personal weakness or even a moral failure.

She addressed those present - MEPs, members of cabinet and Health Attachés - moreover by explaining that the challenge facing those who wish to develop positive approaches, policies and strategies for actively facilitating mental health and well-being in the European Union, therefore, includes the recognition that mental health in its fullest sense can no longer be the exclusive preserve of mental health professionals.

Instead, it is now time to move forward to an approach to mental health and well-being which explores its relevance not only in relation to affected individuals and their families, but also as an issue of significance to, for example, schools, colleges, employers, faith communities, charities, voluntary groups and other networks. Promoting and nurturing mental health and well-being should go hand in hand with planning for a prosperous and just economy, working to respond to the challenges presented by poverty and deprivation and facilitating social cohesion and inclusion.

Malgorzata Kmita concluded by stating that mental health is not just about an absence of mental illness, but that it is about the presence of mental health and well-being at both the personal and social levels, based on solid foundations, which include prevention, promotion and appropriate intervention strategies at all levels of society including schools, the family, employment, communities, churches and temples, health and socio-economic settings.

It is up to us to show the future generations that we have not failed them in the creation of a better, healthier and just Europe. If we do not take societal mental health and well-being seriously, even the best therapy or therapist will never be a substitute for an inclusive society and a democratic economy in which its members are active participatory citizens.

Finally, a fruitful discussion with the audience took place on key mental health topics. Several questions were put from the participants to John Bowis, Malgorzata Kmita and MHE Executive Committee members. The main issues raised were on the importance of the protection and promotion of the mental health of children and adolescents; the need of increased research activities in the field of mental health; the mental health needs of asylum seekers; and the call for more and better cooperation between stakeholders involved in mental health issues at all levels.

Mental Health Europe
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