



The Green Paper: Improving the mental health of the population. Towards a strategy on mental health for the European Union

This is an important paper. Once approved by the European Commission, it will provide directions for politicians, administrators, non-governmental bodies, professionals and the public on how to promote mental health, and prevent mental problems and suicide, at national and regional levels in Europe.

This paper gives visibility to a considerable problem now impacting on Europe. As an indication of the scale of mental problems, an estimated 27% of the adult population experience mental ill-health during any one year.

Mental ill-health affects millions of people. Yet it may be a banal statement of the obvious, but the lack of clear policies and the scant economic resources available, due to the area being given low priority, along with the associated taboo and stigma, represent a major social threat to public health if nothing is done.

Every year, nearly 58,000 European citizens die by suicide and approximately 580,000 are hospitalised following suicide attempts. The latter figure is the tip of the iceberg: many investigations show that an approximately equal number of attempted suicides (some 500,000) are never registered in hospitals.

If the Green Paper becomes a policy instrument approved by the European Commission, it will be a key strategic document that can stimulate the implementation of the WHO Mental Health Declaration. This Declaration was signed in January 2005, during the WHO European Ministerial Conference on Mental Health, by all the ministers, including those from the EU.

One important future measure is to involve the entire EU population by boosting popular awareness and knowledge for promoting mental health and preventing mental problems as well as suicidal behaviours. Through increased awareness and knowledge, a change in behaviour and negative attitudes towards mentally disturbed and suicidal people is achievable.

Within the European Union the Green Paper, once it has been approved as policy, will help to facilitate interchange of experience and best practices among member countries, as well as helping to prevent mistakes in the implementation of new reforms.

The Green Paper, as such, is already encouraging various processes in Europe. This is a highly favourable outcome. However, the concepts need to be tightened up and interdisciplinary implementation programmes created. Intergovernmental collaboration involving various organisations, as well as between WHO, OECD, etc should be fostered.

The Green Paper also needs to establish a lasting mechanism for consultation and exchange of information at every level.

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