

SUBMISSION TO REFLECTION PROCESS
ISLANDS PROJECT
INTEGRATED SYSTEM FOR LONG DISTANCE PSYCHIATRIC
ASSISTANCE AND NON-CONVENTIONAL DISTRIBUTED HEALTH
SERVICES
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RESPONSE TO THE REFLECTION PROCESS FOR
A NEW EU HEALTH STRATEGY
“Enabling good Health for all”

In many member states of the European Union citizens are deprived of equity in accessing healthcare and in particular psychiatric healthcare, due to their remoteness from centres of expertise and appropriate services. They therefore do not currently benefit from psychiatric health service support, information and intervention as other citizens would who are located in more central, urban areas.

Islands, a research consortium, funded under the EU Quality of Life Programme, is developing integrated services and solutions to make the psychiatric health and well-being a reality for many E.U. citizens who find themselves marginalised from appropriate treatment due mainly to issues of geographic location.

The Islands Consortium supports the evolving E.U. health policy and welcomes **Commissioner Byrne’s Reflection Process**. We wish to contribute positively to the reflection process.

We agree with Commissioner Byrne that the important health challenges facing our societies in Europe are a shared responsibility and indeed the corollary of this, shared opportunities to benefit from new developments and services.

Mental illnesses are common to all countries in the European Union and cause immense suffering. People with these disorders are often subjected to social isolation, poor quality of life and increased mortality. These disorders are the cause of staggering economic and social costs.

One in four patients visiting a health service has at least one mental, neurological or behavioural disorder but most of these disorders are neither properly diagnosed nor treated.

Barriers to effective treatment of mental illness include lack of recognition of the seriousness of mental illness and lack of understanding about the benefits of services. Policy makers, insurance companies, health and labour policies, and the public at large – all discriminate between physical and mental problems.

MENTAL HEALTH POLICIES, LEGISLATION, COMMUNITY CARE FACILITIES, AND TREATMENTS FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS ARE NOT GIVEN THE PRIORITY THEY DESERVE.

In most countries women report depression and anxiety about twice as often as men (Desjarlais et al. 1995) but more men commit suicide, particularly in the younger groups where on average it is 4.5 times higher, reaching up to 12 times in some countries. Indeed in countries, such as England and Denmark suicide is the biggest cause of death in men aged 16-44 (16- 50 in Denmark). The World Mental Health Report has highlighted the increasing burden of psychological illness and its impacts (Desjarlais et al.)

Mental illnesses affect and are affected by chronic conditions such as cancer, heart and cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and HIV/AIDS. Untreated, they bring about unhealthy behaviour, non-compliance with prescribed medical regimens, diminished immune functioning, and poor prognosis.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF EU POLICY IN PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH?

Healthy lifestyles are important, illness is costly. It takes considerable resources both at State and Community level to cope with and reduce health problems. The increasing prevalence of chronic illness and disabling conditions, together with the rising age

Achieving good health for all is a necessity that requires the active participation of all actors in society. Good health, in all its forms, requires health to be at the centre of all policy making. We need to ensure that social environment and its democratic structure act in synergy and that this is understood and supported by their citizens.

We agree with the Commission's strategy to focus on health promotion, prevention and the sharing of best practice across Europe. Health is important and illness is costly. All too often national healthcare systems have to focus their resources on expensive treatment and care.

This situation is exacerbated when the services need to be developed and delivered to small isolated populations that are already economically and often in other ways, marginalised.

To tackle the current and developing health challenges brought about by ageing populations and changes to life-style related conditions and diseases, we need to encourage and engage citizens, health providers and professionals in the potential advantages that can be attained through the use of advanced communications services for the delivery of psychiatric services, support and information. The integration of such services into platforms such as currently being developed by Islands, provides at once the ability to increase service provision, while reducing the cost of delivery to both the health providing organisation, professionals and citizens seeking such levels of health and information intervention.

We support the initiative to integrate health into the Lisbon agenda and develop a structural indicator for monitoring the evolution of healthy life years. The Islands consortium fully supports the Commissioner's proposal of integrating health into and through other policy areas and measures

We believe that the development of integrated services as currently in development in the Islands Project as an EU Quality of Life Programme will provide the Commission and in particular health policy makers with a working model that provides comprehensive sets of tested services that, if

rolled out, have the potential to provide the necessary levels of psychiatric healthcare expected and in demand from all citizens., regardless of location.

This will assist in closing the gap between what is needed and what is currently available to reduce the burden of mental disorders worldwide, and promoting mental health with in regions using methods that are cost effective and timely. The recently launched mental health Global Action Programme (mhGAP) focuses on forging strategic partnerships to enhance countries' capacity to combat stigma, reduce the burden of mental disorders and promote mental health.(WHO Mental Health Report 2001). Islands provides this type of infrastruncture in the form of useful and useable services for all.

It provides the core for information platforms focussing on prevention, treatment and rehabilitation for people, particularly those in key areas for treatment and support including depression, schizophrenia, alcohol and drug dependence, dementia etc. The demand for responsiveness by governments to mental health concerns, to enhance services, to reduce the burden of mental disorders, and to reduce the devastating impact of stigma and discrimination can be directly assisted through this type of initiative.

Many countries are beginning to act and move forward innovatively. Islands can catalyse this new energy to improve the mental health situation across EU regional areas. The opportunity to advance the momentum generated into intensive action so that people with mental illness, wherever they are, can access needed services and can achieve the highest level of recovery.

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