



# Improving the mental health of the population: Towards a strategy on mental health for the European Union

IOSH response to the European Commission  
Green Paper on Mental Health Strategy

Consultation  
response  
**31.05.06**

## About IOSH

Founded in 1945, the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) has over 29,000 individual members, is Europe's largest occupational safety and health (OSH) professional body and has strong OSH links worldwide, with members in over 50 other countries. Incorporated by Royal Charter, a registered charity and international NGO, IOSH is the guardian of OSH standards of competence in the UK and provider of professional development and awareness training courses. The Institution regulates and steers the profession, maintaining standards and providing impartial, authoritative, free guidance on OSH issues. Regularly consulted by government departments and other bodies on OSH issues, IOSH is the founding member and secretariat to UK, European and International professional body networks. The Institution also has a research and development fund, which is helping to establish and develop the evidence-base for OSH policy and practice and is closing knowledge gaps in this area.

IOSH has 25 Branches in the UK and worldwide including the Caribbean, Hong Kong and the Republic of Ireland. We have 15 special interest groups covering the following employment sectors and topic areas: communications and media; construction; consultancy; education; environment; fire risk management; food and drink; healthcare; international; offshore; public services; railways; retail and distribution; rural industries; and safety sciences. IOSH members work at both strategic and operational levels across all employment sectors and our vision is:

**“A world of work which is safe, healthy and sustainable”**

IOSH welcomes the opportunity to comment on the European Commission's Green Paper - *Improving the mental health of the population: Towards a strategy on mental health for the European Union*. Recognising the importance of this issue, both nationally and within the European context, we focus our comments on the work-related aspects of mental health and the role occupational safety and health (OSH) professionals can play as part of a co-ordinated, multidisciplinary approach to promoting better health.

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## General Comments

We fully support the Green Paper statements that “There is no health without mental health.” and that “Mental and physical health is closely inter-related.” (p.4). We also strongly believe that health and work are intrinsically linked, i.e. that ‘health affects work and work affects health’. At the recent ENSHPO <sup>1</sup> conference (June 2005, Brussels) ‘*Opportunities and challenges for OSH practitioners in Europe*’, the health and safety risks, both physical and psychosocial, associated with socio-economic developments were explored. These developments include: changing work patterns, outsourcing and migrant labour; an increasingly feminised society; and an ageing population. There was acknowledgement that occupational health issues present many challenges, including the protection of vulnerable groups in the workplace and the prevention of musculoskeletal disorders, which can result from both physical and psychosocial risk factors, and illnesses associated with work-related stress, including depression and anxiety disorders.

The role of the OSH practitioner is to help protect and improve the health and safety of workers. Working closely with employers and employees, they advise on practical solutions to prevent people being made ill or injured by work, especially those most at risk, such as young, inexperienced or older workers, expectant mothers, migrant workers and people with disabilities and special needs. Practitioners can also give advice on absence management, reasonable adjustments and flexible working arrangements, helping those who have been ill or injured to remain in/return to or join the workforce as appropriate. When implementing return to work and rehabilitation programmes following sickness absence, OSH practitioners take a multidisciplinary approach, involving workers, doctors, managers, human resource officers, employment advisers, occupational health nurses and physicians and others, as required. Additionally, practitioners are involved in promoting health, communicating and sharing important health improvement messages, covering issues such as stress management, smoking cessation, fitness and healthy eating.

## Specific Comments

In response to your consultation questions, we would make the following comments:

### ***How relevant is the mental health of the population for the EU’s strategic policy objectives, as detailed in section 1?***

IOSH believes that the mental health of the population is essential to the European Union’s strategic objective of bringing “tangible, practical benefits to the quality of life for European citizens” and that effective occupational safety and health management has a key role in preventing illness and promoting health.

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<sup>1</sup> ENSHPO = European Network of Safety and Health Professional Organisations [www.enshpo.org](http://www.enshpo.org)

***Would the development of a comprehensive EU-strategy on mental health add value to the existing and envisaged actions and does section 5 propose adequate priorities?***

IOSH agrees that a comprehensive European Union strategy on mental health would add value by creating a framework for sharing and co-operation; increasing coherence across different policy sectors; and providing an important platform for involving relevant stakeholders in building solutions. Additionally, we believe it could help raise the profile of mental health issues generally across Europe.

While agreeing that the priorities identified are adequate, we urge the inclusion of a training needs analysis, in order to help ensure adequate training of all those whose roles can impact the mental health of people at work, including supervisors, managers, employment advisers and human resource, healthcare and OSH professionals.

***Are the initiatives proposed in sections 6 and 7 appropriate to support the coordination between Member States, to promote the integration of mental health into the health and non-health policies and stakeholder action, and to better liaise research and policy on mental health aspects?***

IOSH agrees that the initiatives proposed will support co-ordination between Member States in developing and implementing a strategy to deliver the Mental Health Declaration and Action Plan for Europe, drawn up at the WHO European Ministerial Conference on Mental Health in Helsinki, Finland, 12 – 15 January 2005. An EU framework could help disseminate results of the various mental health initiatives taking place in Europe, improve the interface between policy and research, and assist in the sharing of information and best practice.

We strongly support an evidence-based approach to policy and practice in occupational safety and health and in 2005 established our own research and development fund and programme. IOSH also co-sponsors the work of the British Occupational Health Research Foundation (BOHRF) which, in 2005, commissioned an evidence review of *Workplace interventions for people with common mental health problems*. The full report and summary leaflets for employers and employees and for health professionals are available as free downloads from the BOHRF website <sup>2</sup> and IOSH has distributed copies of the leaflets through the IOSH Branch network.

For more information about IOSH, its members and its work, please visit [www.iosh.co.uk](http://www.iosh.co.uk)

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<sup>2</sup> BOHRF website [www.bohrf.org.uk](http://www.bohrf.org.uk)

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