European Commission

Mental health
and the pandemic:
**living, caring, acting**!

10 May 2021

CONFERENCE REPORT

#MentalHealthEU

Health and
Food Safety

# Introduction

*The mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be seen long after the public health crisis recedes, according to a wide range of policymakers and stakeholder groups taking part in a high-level online event on 10 May. Kicking off European Mental Health Awareness Week 2021, Mental Health and the pandemic: Living, caring, acting! attracted close to 2,000 participants and featured several promising approaches to addressing the growing burden of mental illness. These promising approaches provided practical examples of solutions to inspire conference participants and will be published alongside this report.*

The one-day event gave voice to different groups in our society, including people with pre-existing mental health problems and those providing care. The conference included plenary sessions featuring an array of speakers, including representatives from EU countries, the European Commission and European Parliament, as well as from patient organisations, non-governmental organisations, health professionals, civil society and international organisations. Parallel sessions focused on living, caring and responding to the mental health challenges arising from the pandemic. The scene was set for each parallel session by emotionally moving video testimonials from people affected by these challenges.

**Stella Kyriakides**, European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, warned of a coming 'tsunami' of mental health needs. '*An unseen mental health emergency is sweeping across the European Union, like a silent pandemic,*' she said. School closures, job losses and disruption of health and social services are taking a toll, particularly on vulnerable groups. The Commissioner called on participants to imagine a healthier, more resilient and fairer European Union to answer the needs of citizens.

This was echoed by **Marta Temido**, Minister for Health, Portugal, who pointed to the worsening rates of anxiety, depression and insomnia arising from periods of confinement. For its part, Portugal, which holds the Presidency of the European Council, has invested in national mental health programmes following an integrated model recommended by the World Health Organization. This includes promoting self care, community outreach through mental health helplines, investing in primary care, and improving access to specialised psychiatric services. '*As European Member States strive to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic as a true Health Union, the same efforts must be extended to responding to the mental health challenges we face,*' she said.

With Europe beginning to look towards the post-crisis phase of the pandemic, it is important that Member States, the Commission and the World Health Organization work together to ensure that mental health is fully integrated into national economic recovery plans, according to **Hans Henri P Kluge**, Director, WHO Regional Office for Europe. The WHO has set up a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) to help inform its policy response and to shape the new Framework for Action on mental health in the WHO European Region. In addition, the establishment of a Pan-European Mental Health Coalition will help to connect policymakers with NGOs to ensure future policies meet the needs of service users and their families. '*There is no health without mental health,*' said Dr Kluge. '*The good news is that political leaders recognise this and are working together to respond to the challenge.*'

**Sara Cerdas**, MEP, Co-chair Coalition for Mental Health and Wellbeing, highlighted the stigma faced by people in need of mental health services. She said mental health should not be viewed differently to other illnesses and called for a stronger focus on evidence-based interventions that could improve people's lives. For example, the connection between physical exercise and mental wellbeing is well established, and this should be reflected in a One Health approach to policymaking. Despite the growing burden arising from the pandemic, **Dr Cerdas** said she sensed momentum building behind this issue: '*Let's seize this opportunity to take a step forward in improving mental health care for European citizens.*'

# Understanding the challenge

*This session provided an overview of what is currently known about the mental health impact of the pandemic, and how new EU-funded research can help to bridge existing knowledge gaps and improve further understanding. As such, it provided a baseline from where to discuss and explore the mental impact of the pandemic on living and caring.*

Mental health disorders already represented a significant health burden prior to the pandemic, with around 16% of the European population suffering from a mental disorder. As these conditions can affect people at any stage of life, including those of working age, the economic toll can be significant.

**Pim Cuijpers**, Co-chair of the TAG on the mental health impacts of COVID-19 in the WHO European Region, said the cost of mental health problems in the European Union add up to around €600 billion annually, primarily due to productivity losses.

The pandemic has made matters worse and could have long-term consequences, he added. However, the full impact is not yet clear as data is still emerging. '*We know there is a big increase in risk factors that lead to mental health problems – inequality, unemployment, isolation and loneliness, childhood adversity, violence, lack of schooling and unhealthy lifestyles*,' said Professor Cuijpers. While the evidence base on the pandemic's mental health impact is still developing, it is already clear that strengthening resilience through preventive interventions is very much needed. He also recommended strengthening public mental health care, and further developing digital services.

**Irene Norstedt**, Director, People Directorate, DG Research & Innovation, European Commission, highlighted EU investment in brain health research and mental health. EU-funded research projects designed to prevent, diagnose and treat mental illness, along with developing new e-tools and care models, are ongoing. There are opportunities to develop a more personalised approach to mental health and to identify innovative solutions that improve mental health services. EU-wide clinical trial networks and the COVID-19 data platform are helping to advance knowledge in a range of areas including social sciences and mental health, she added. The new Horizon Europe programme also addresses mental health, and health inequalities that are affecting the most vulnerable populations. DG Research and Innovation emphasises engaging young people in collaborative research activities, especially on mental health and substance use. This is particularly important as evidence shows half of all mental health disorders come to the fore by the age of 14. Since last December, five new research projects kicked off to better understand the behavioural, social and economic impact of the pandemic. '*It is important that the results of this research are taken up, deployed and piloted to better prepare for the future*,' Ms Norstedt added.

Evidence from rolling surveys already show the impact of pandemic-related stress on wellbeing. **Massimiliano Mascherini**, Head of Unit ad interim for Social Policies, at EUROFOUND, said countries that implemented prolonged lockdowns tend to show more severe mental health issues. The EUROFOUND Living, Working and COVID-19 survey showed an improvement in summer 2020 when restrictions eased but significant increases in distress in spring 2021. Women were generally hit harder than men by feelings of tension and depression due to unequal distribution of household responsibilities, while people in younger and prime age cohorts reported a disproportionately higher negative emotional impact compared to older people. School closures added to the strain on children and young adults whereas workplace closures tended to relieve pressure. '*COVID-19 is like Kerberos – the three-headed hound from Greek mythology*,' Mr Mascherini said. '*It is a public health crisis, an economic crisis and a social crisis. We need holistic approach that tackles all three.*'

Reflecting on this, event moderator **John F Ryan**, Director, Public Health, European Commission, agreed that health policy must not operate in a silo and that it will be important to economic recovery. He also reinforced the need to share and apply the results of EU-funded research that has the potential to positively affect people's lives.

# Living – Children, young people, parents and teachers

Chaired by:

**Valeria Setti**
Commission Coordinator for the rights of the child,
DG for Justice and Consumers,
European Commission

*The impact of closing educational facilities was a particular focus of this session. In the absence of formal in-person education, students experienced isolation, families struggled with additional pressures, and pre-existing inequalities were exacerbated. Recognising some of these challenges, a storybook called My Hero is You has been developed to address the concerns of children (see Promising Approaches).*

School can be a refuge for children living in challenging home environments and those with unsuitable living conditions fell further behind during the pandemic. This is supported by research from Eurochild which shows that children living in poverty or suffering social exclusion are more likely to endure mental health issues. One in 10 children feel sad or unhappy most of the time, putting them at elevated risk of mental health problems in adulthood. Eurochild also pointed to a gender divide: girls tended to fare worse during the pandemic, and experts worry that rates of eating disorders and self-harm could rise further.

School closures and gender were also to the fore in a discussion on how teachers had been affected by the pandemic. As teaching is a female-dominated profession, many of those responsible for delivering online teaching were also managing home-schooling for their own children. Increased workloads and demand for support outside working hours added to the strain. Overall, it was clear that the challenges affecting teachers impact students; and the challenges impacting students also make teachers' jobs more complex.

Looking beyond school-aged children and adolescents, university students have experienced severe disruption to their educational and social experiences. Isolation, rising workloads, and waning motivation were highlighted. Female students and those with financial concerns were at particular risk.

Students called for support for counselling and training for staff, along with improved data collection to ensure the problem is well understood.

Speakers expressed appreciation for new EU initiatives such as the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee, expecting these to support much needed action. The Child Guarantee covers education, nutrition, housing, health care – all issues that shape wellbeing.

# Living – Older people and vulnerable groups

Chaired by:

**Isabel de la Mata**
Principal Adviser for Health and Crisis management,
DG for Health and Food Safety,
European Commission

*This session looked at a range of vulnerable groups, including older people, those living with pre-existing conditions such as cancer, rare diseases or dementia, homeless people, and people from migrant and refugee communities. The challenges they face are diverse but there were some common themes including social exclusion and difficulty accessing services. Limited familiarity with digital technologies is also a barrier, including for older people, some of whom suffered from lack of contact with family.*

Disruption to care was a major issue for older people, even if many showed considerable resilience. AGE Europe called for a stronger focus on safeguarding older people's human rights, and on efforts to tackle ageism. People with dementia were identified as the forgotten victims of the pandemic. In addition to facing higher risk of hospitalisation and death from COVID-19, the pandemic may have accelerated cognitive decline for many.

There were some positives: patient support groups and community volunteers took action to support vulnerable groups using telephone helplines and grocery delivery services. Care homes were also commended for using digital tools and trying to facilitate as much family contact as could safely be provided. Alzheimer's Europe called for people with dementia and their carers to be prioritised for vaccination, and for the needs of older people to be reflected in EU and national research priorities. The concerns of people living with cancer were also highlighted, notably the fear of contracting COVID-19 alongside worries arising from missed medical appointments.

The pandemic has exacerbated the growing homelessness problems which disproportionately affect single men, along with growing numbers of families and migrants. Mental health problems can be a cause of homelessness and a result of homelessness – sometimes both. There was a call for mental health to be a feature of the forthcoming EU Homeless Platform. It is well-established that

experiencing homelessness as a child puts people at much greater risk of homelessness and mental health illnesses later in life. This suggests that investing in housing should be seen as a positive public health intervention.

# Caring – Health Care Workers

Chaired by:

**Jesús Alvarez Hidalgo**
Policy Officer Health and Safety,
DG Employment

*The prevailing theme was the need to build resilience among health care workers, and boost staff retention in the face of pressure from COVID-19. The Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME) highlighted the key challenges faced by doctors and health care workers: unprecedented workload, a lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and medicines, as well as burnout, helplessness, the death of colleagues, and stigmatisation as disease spreaders.*

Concerns about the strain on frontline health workers were reflected by the European Federation of Nurses Associations which presented data showing 80% of national nursing associations have received reports of mental health distress from nurses. Nursing representatives are seeking closer collaboration to build a more resilient nursing workforce.

The European Commission Expert Panel on Effective Ways of Investing in Health hopes to see more evidence-based research to support effective interventions. There is a need to recognise COVID-19 as an occupational disease, and to investigate impact of the pandemic on workers' mental health.

Malta has introduced a suite of initiatives in the face of the pandemic (see Promising Approaches). This includes a dedicated mental health support phone line, and the publication of guides on resilience and self-care, such as videos on breathing techniques, reflexology, and sleep hygiene. In addition, a leadership initiative for health care workers, and an educational module for postgraduate medical trainees, is helping them to access managerial roles. This can help to ensure greater input for health professionals in health services.

Speakers identified the need for greater attention to be given to mental health wellbeing, proper staffing, access to support services, increased availability of PPE, and support training.

The CPME collects and shares good practices in this area. Examples from the British, Bulgarian, and Norwegian Medical Associations, and the Irish Medical Organisation, can be found on the CPME website. [www.cpme.eu/]

# Caring – Workers in Social and Residential Care, Informal Carers

Chaired by:

**Maria Jepsen**
Acting Executive Director
of the European Foundation for the Improvement
of Living and Working Conditions.

*Prominent concerns cited in this session included the precarious employment status of carers, a lack of support, a lack of PPE, the failure to recognise carers alongside health care workers, and the challenges faced in retaining carers.*

Eurocarers noted that informal carers are the largest providers of health and social care support. They are under increased strain, with COVID-19 prompting a 17% increase in the weekly hours of care, more intense care, and more people becoming informal carers. The European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities said the essential nature of these services has long been unrecognised. In the absence of adequate supports, carers will become patients.

Almost half of carers did not have adequate PPE in April 2020, according to EU-OSHA, and one in five care workers have considered quitting over the lack of PPE. The European Public Service Union (EPSU) added that these problems were exacerbated by privatisation, underfunding and fragmentation of services that began prior to the pandemic. EPSU is calling on the European Parliament to launch an inquiry into the tragic effects of COVID-19 on the care sector.

All speakers agreed on the need to recognise, acknowledge and support carers across policies. Better links between formal and informal care, more technological solutions, and increased support of civil society organisations are needed. There is also an important role for managers in handling staff workload, shift work and isolation. It was noted that mental health is an occupational safety and health (OSH) issue, and that better enforcement can help to improve working conditions. Speakers proposed ratification of the ILO

Conventions 190 on Violence and Harassment at Work, and for the next EU Occupational Safety and Health strategy (2021-2027) to focus more on mental health.

Overall, it was felt the care sector needs better investment, ringfencing of social funding, and greater social dialogue at European level. While the public and policymakers have expressed their gratitude to health, social and care workers, all speakers agreed that 'Applause is not enough'.

# Responding – Pre-existing mental health needs: impact on people and services

Chaired by:

**Dan Chish**

Programme Manager for Mental Health, WHO Regional Office for Europe

*Daily routines collapsed in lockdown and isolation, adding to the strain on family, social and professional communities. It had been particularly hard to bear for people with mental health conditions, speakers explained.*

The psychological consequences of lockdowns on people suffering from schizophrenia or dementia have been significant. Schizophrenia patients report worsening symptoms of depression and anxiety. For people with dementia there has been a significant overall functional decline, and higher COVID-related mortality.

In France, fears of a rise in suicide behaviours during the pandemic had proved unfounded, it was said – except for patients aged 15 and younger. This age group reported a major psychological impact from lockdown, including increased anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and suicidal behaviour.

A mental health project in Poland has shown how digital tools can help to link patients with mental health information that they can use to seek care (see Promising Approaches). The 'missing link' to improving patient outcomes is not always infrastructure but a system that connects individuals with a network of existing services.

Overall, the panel had two main recommendations for addressing existing mental health needs as Europe emerges from the crisis. The first was that patients with mental health conditions be given priority access to vaccines. The second was that short and long-term measures be developed to help children.

Parallel session 6

# Responding – Health systems fit to meet future mental health needs

Chaired by:

**Maya Matthews**

Head of Unit Performance of national health systems, DG for Health and Food Safety, European Commission

*After more than a year of coronavirus response measures around the EU, countries need now to consider how social and health systems can develop, while ensuring that no one is left behind. Speakers agreed that this is a challenge as well as major opportunity.*

At the start of the pandemic, mental health services changed overnight in many countries. The staff numbers available were suddenly reduced, while accessibility rules changed. Meanwhile, the mental health of the population has deteriorated significantly, leading to rising demand for care. Rates of depression and anxiety are particularly high, with young people, women, parents and health care workers most likely to be affected.

Health systems were ill-prepared for the mental health crisis due to a failure to implement comprehensive interventions prior to the pandemic. Regular feedback on the mental health and wellbeing of the population would help services to adapt more quickly to changing needs.

Speakers warned against overestimating the short-term consequences of a pandemic – or underestimating the long-term impact. As well as the mental health effects on children and older people mentioned elsewhere at the event, the age group 25-39 has suffered badly from a lack of social opportunities and school closures. The task ahead is huge, it was agreed, but sensitising people to mental health problems can help to address it.

# Acting: What can different actors contribute given their role and perspective?

*The final session focused on how political actors and stakeholders can respond to the many challenges set out in the earlier discussions. In a recorded video message, Janez Poklukar, Minister for Health, Republic of Slovenia, said he hoped to use Slovenia's forthcoming Presidency of the European Council to foster cooperation and learning between Member States. 'The impact of depression, anxiety and violence will outlive the pandemic,' he said. 'We must invest much more in social and health protection programmes for vulnerable groups that have suffered most.'*

**Maria Walsh**, MEP, said policymakers must take a holistic approach to managing the recovery phase of the current crisis – learning lessons from the response to the financial crisis a decade ago where the focus was primarily on the economy. '*Failure to do so will create a two-tier society, separating those who can manage their mental health from those who cannot.*' As Co-chair of the MEP Alliance for Mental Health and Coalition for Mental Health and Wellbeing, she said designating a European Year of Good Mental Health would send a strong signal that 'mental health is everyone's business'.

The EU's leadership on mental health and children's rights was commended by **Henriette Fore**, Executive Director, UNICEF, who painted a stark picture of the impact of the pandemic on young people. '*There is so much more we need to do. And we need to do it together,*' she said. UNICEF is urging EU Member States to focus on three key areas of work: developing '*intervention packages*' for mental health; advocating globally for the mental health needs of children and young people living in humanitarian situations; and sharing best practices not only with one another but with countries around the world. She said UNICEF's upcoming flagship State of the World's Children report for 2021 will focus entirely on mental health and wellbeing.

Civil society stakeholders in Europe have a key role to play in deepening societal understanding of mental health, addressing stigma and sharing solutions, according to **Liuska Sanna**, Acting Director, Mental Health Europe. '*We plan to use the EU Health Policy Platform to further develop the existing stakeholder network on the mental health impact of COVID-19,*' she said. '*This will serve as an information hub, allowing users to map good practices, identify data gaps, and share knowledge and resources.*'

**Joost Korte**, Director General, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission, highlighted two key areas where the EU can contribute to an inclusive post-pandemic recovery: occupational safety and social legislation. The Commission is preparing the forthcoming EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027 which will address mental health, including prevention. Strong social and labour laws can provide equal treatment and quality jobs, while the proposed European Child Guarantee will address income poverty and social exclusion. 'We must have a recovery that is not only green and digital, but also fair,' he stressed.

**Sandra Gallina**, Director General, DG for Health and Food Safety, European Commission, said the full scale of the impact of the pandemic is not yet visible. Intersectoral responses are needed, although this will require truly interdisciplinary actions. The third Health Programme's Annual Work Plan for 2020 includes support for mental health system reform, suicide prevention and depression, and a new Joint Action on Mental Health will kick off this autumn. In addition, she described the new EU4Health Programme as '*a real gamechanger and a paradigm shift for the new strong European Health Union we are working to build*'.

# Closing message

**Commissioner Stella Kyriakides** closed the conference by thanking the broad range of contributors who highlighted the mental health challenges and solutions that will characterise the coming years. She acknowledged the need to build resilient health systems, support those in need, and to address stigma surrounding mental health. While encouraging continued engagement from the large community of stakeholders attending the event, **Commissioner Kyriakides** pledged to ramp up the Commission's efforts to boost resilience and support those in need, also to consider how the EU4Health programme may support concrete and targeted improvements. She also invited the audience to take positives from this event, acknowledging the commitment, expertise and good practices that are already out there.

*'I look forward to working very closely with you', she said while reaching out to the audience, 'and there is a lot of work to do. So, when you press your button this time to leave our virtual meeting, let this be 'until we meet again'.'*

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# #MentalHealthEU