



Informal Meeting of Health Ministers

8–9 July 2013, Vilnius, Lithuania

Mental Health and Well-being of Older People **Discussion paper**

The EU high-level conference “Together for Mental Health and Well-being” which was held in Brussels on 12-13 June 2008 approved the “**European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being**”. *Promoting and protecting the mental health of older people are one of the five key priorities of the European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being.*

The consequences of demographic change in Europe as the population of older people increases are a 21st century challenge for European societies. Greater life expectancy is a positive result of progress. But living longer also increases the risk of physical and mental diseases. ***The Pact invites policymakers and stakeholders to take action inter alia to:***

- Promote the active participation of older people in community life, including the promotion of physical activity and educational opportunities;
- Develop flexible retirement schemes which allow older people to remain at work longer on a full-time or part-time basis;
- Provide measures to promote mental health and well-being among older people receiving care (medical and/or social) in both community and institutional settings.

There are many reasons – medical, social, economic, why we should pay attention to healthy ageing. Healthy and active ageing benefits Europeans by ensuring ability to lead long healthy lives, maximising the valuable contributions of older people to the society, and finally minimising the costs of health and social care systems.

There are some possible factors influencing mental health of older people. Retirement often associated with a loss of status and structure in daily activities, reduced role in society life and loss of financial stability and independency. Physical changes and increased vulnerability to chronic health conditions may limit mobility and enhance social isolation. The good physical state supports mental health, and contrarily, poor physical condition has a negative impact on mental health. Established, that the close relationship between psychological and cognitive health and lifestyle exists. Healthy lifestyle of active ageing in older age could be promoted by encouraging physical activity, healthy eating behaviour, no smoking and no or moderate alcohol consumption in younger age, because today’s young people are tomorrow’s older European citizens.

Effective health interventions, particularly health promotion and disease prevention programmes that target the main causes of morbidity and mortality can help to minimize the cost pressures associated with ageing by ensuring that people stay healthy in old age. These include interventions to tackle obesity and hypertension, immunizations, and stress prevention programmes. Such interventions may also bring wider economic benefits, as people who can expect to live a long and healthy life have a strong incentive to invest in developing their skills when younger and to extend their working lives.

Ageing populations require an adequate response from health systems. Effective health interventions can improve mental and physical well-being and help people stay healthy in old age.

However, few of the interventions proposed to promote healthy ageing have been subject to economic Policy brief evaluation, and there is concern that some may actually increase cost and worsen health. While their impact on direct health care costs is uncertain, healthy ageing can be expected to have wider economic benefits, as people who can expect to live a long and healthy life have a strong incentive to invest in developing their skills knowing that they will reap lifelong benefits. They may also be more inclined to stay in the labour force. The issues facing ageing populations demand measures that combine support for elderly people with policies addressed to younger generations who will benefit subsequently from early intervention. Policy options include better coordination of care, improved management of hospital admissions, enhancing prevention and encouraging healthy lifestyles, for example by maintaining physical activity or promoting healthy eating.

Older age brings many stressors that may increase mental ill health, such as decreasing functional capacity and social isolation. Low social and economic status increases the vulnerability to mental ill health. Social connectedness has a positive effect on health. People who remain actively engaged in life and connected to those around them are generally happier, in better physical and mental health, and more empowered to cope effectively with change and life transitions. Distress, isolation and social exclusion substantially increase the risk of poor health and loneliness, and may even act as predictors of death.

Mental disorders are on the rise in the EU. Today, almost 11% of the population are estimated to experience mental disorders. Depression affects 10–15% of persons over 65 but the numbers might be even higher if the whole spectrum of depressive syndromes, including subclinical depression and depressive symptoms, is considered. Over 5 million people (about 1.1–1.3% population) in the EU have dementia. Mental health disorders also have a serious impact on physical health and are associated with some of today's most pressing chronic diseases, including diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. In the Western societies, stroke is a fourth leading cause of death and a major cause of permanent disability. About 1 in 4 people who have a stroke develop signs of dementia within 1 year. Stroke and dementia are common, costly, due to serious and long-term disability they impose enormous socio-economic burden on the individuals and society. Alcohol use disorders are common among older people, more so in males, especially those who are socially isolated, single and separated or divorced. Problematic alcohol use is associated with widespread impairments in physical, psychological, social and cognitive health. Also psychotropic drug use among older people is high, especially in women, and increases with age. Older people are the group with the highest suicide rates in Europe with a constant increase with age and even higher rates in those above 85 years. The death rates from suicide and intentional self-harm have been increase in absolute numbers is expected in the coming decades as a result of to the demographic ageing of Europe.

It is quite important to highlight, that majority of above-mentioned factors during an economic crisis had stronger effect on mental health of older people, as far as millions of older people in the EU become unemployed and struggled to find a new job, loosed their life-time savings, paid more for basic goods and vital services or simply dropped out of social or cultural life. Possibly, the economic crisis negatively affected older people not only in financial terms, but also in difficulties in accessing health and social services they need. Certainly it was reflected in prevalence of depression, anxiety, increased alcohol consumption and suicidal behaviours. Positive mental health is a key component of overall health, well-being and quality of life. Income is a key determinant of health. There is a strong link between income and mental health. As income decreases, mental well-being also decreases. Many people with mental health conditions rely on social assistance as their primary source of income.

It is extremely important for the Europeans society and health workforce to be able to respond current and future mental health needs of older people as particularly vulnerable group, by providing an adequate level of health promotion, prevention, care and treatment. To achieve this goal strong partnership and effective communication among primary care services, mental health services, social services, patients and careers should be developed. Early and accurate diagnoses of mental health problems enables older people and those who caring for them to understand what is happening, to access appropriate help and meet their care needs. Specific training programmes on

screening of patients for depression, alcohol and substance use should be available for primary care professionals. Interventions dedicated to reduce effects of chronic illness on mental health by improving the management of chronic illness are also important. Availability of accessible and coordinated health and social services can significantly improve self-management of the chronic illness and reduce the risk of subsequent mental health problems.

When elderly people are in good health, they will need fewer health care resources and are also more likely to remain in the labour force. Policies that allow a healthy ageing of the population include a better coordination of health and long-term care services and enhanced prevention services to tackle mental illnesses, smoking and etc. When these policies are implemented in good time, they are not only likely to allow more people to age healthily, but they will also help to make sure that health systems are properly equipped to accommodate population ageing and to reduce social care needs.

The Presidency Conference “Mental Health: Challenges and Possibilities” will be held on 10–11 of October, 2013, in Vilnius and the mental health of older people issues is one of the topics of the conference.

Ministers/Heads of Delegations are invited to consider the following questions in preparation for a discussion:

1. How can health policies support workplaces in promoting mental well-being and preventing mental disorders in order to enable older people to remain active in their working and social life and empower them to stay active, healthy, physically capable, respectable and autonomous? The best practices of EU Countries.

2. How can Ministries of Health and Ministries of Social Affairs work together in order to achieve that the share of people is reduced who are not available for labour markets or leave into work disability or early retirement because of mental health problems?

3. Role of health specialists' in reducing social costs that are related to the ageing of the society.