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EVENT REPORT

INTEGRATIVE MENTAL HEALTH
THE WAY FORWARD



Hosted by the MEP Interest Group on Integrative Medicine and Health
Organised by EUROCAM

INTEGRATIVE MENTAL HEALTH -THE WAY FORWARD-

Members of the MEP Interest Group on Integrative Medicine and Health

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INTEGRATIVE MENTAL HEALTH, THE WAY FORWARD TUESDAY 28 MARCH 2023, THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, BRUSSELS

Experts working at the intersection of Mental Health and Traditional, Complementary, and Integrative Medicine (TCIM) shared evidence-based solutions and explained the practical benefits of applying TCIM in this important area.

MANY GOOD REASONS FOR ADOPTING INTEGRATIVE MENTAL HEALTH

Opening the event, Interest Group Co-chair **MEP Sirpa Pietikäinen** (EPP, Finland) explained that the Integrative Mental Health discussion is only starting, and that the Interest Group meeting is part of the preparations for developing an EU Mental Health Strategy.

She highlighted that COVID-19 had further amplified the challenges for mental wellbeing in Europe; depression rather than physical illness is now a leading cause for early retirement, and also leads to high suicide rates, especially among young people. Treatment, however, remains difficult: the effectiveness of antidepressants is poor, with less than a third of patients deriving the desired outcomes, commonly accompanied by substantial side effects. Moreover, mental health patients are often prescribed three different drugs for extended periods of time.

02

NO HEALTH WITHOUT MENTAL HEALTH

MEP Manuela Ripa (S&D, Germany), Member of the Interest Group stated that mental illness is the pandemic of the 21st century and the next global challenge. Nearly 125 million people in the WHO European region were already living with mental illness before the COVID-19 crisis. Since the beginning of the pandemic, already-common conditions, such as depression and anxiety, have increased by more than 25%, with almost double that rate among young people.

There are several deficiencies in the current treatment approach, characterized by limited mental health care capacity, inequality in service delivery, and adverse effects of widely used medicines. The current model of care is focused on symptom reduction without consideration for social and environmental factors. This contributes to an additional factor in which mental health problems have a strong influence on everyday life, including family relations, schools and in the workplaces.

Crucially, addressing mental health is closely connected with physical health and overall wellbeing. Ms Ripa called for a change in the paradigm and practices of mental healthcare, which will require fundamental reforms in education, clinician training, and research priorities. By moving towards the creation of an ecosystem of collaborative public mental health care, person-centred care focused on prevention, resilience, mental health promotion and health literacy could be delivered.

She continued by arguing that Traditional, Complementary and Integrative Medicine (TCIM) can play an essential role in treating mental ill-health alongside regular medicines.

Lifestyle interventions like healthy nutrition, exercise, relaxation, sound sleep, mind-body practices, including mindfulness and yoga, and methods such as acupuncture, and herbal and homeopathic medicines, should be accessible to more people. There is growing scientific evidence demonstrating the positive effects of TCIM on mental health, inter alia, by improving the daily management of mental illness through lifestyle interventions and building up mental and physical resilience.

Researchers have shown that 55% per cent of the patients that followed an integrative therapy felt improvements in their depression and anxiety symptoms. More research investment is needed to enhance understanding of resilience factors that protect an individual from developing physical and emotional illness in the face of stress and other pathogenic factors, to identify optimal strategies in developing resilience within healthcare, and to identify social factors that can be modified to support resilience to promote public health.

03

JIM VAN OS**PROFESSOR OF PSYCHIATRIC EPIDEMIOLOGY AND PUBLIC
HEALTH***“A public mental health approach”*

The first presenter, **Dr Jim van Os, Professor of Psychiatric Epidemiology and Public Health (Utrecht University Medical Centre, Netherlands) and Visiting Professor of Psychiatric Epidemiology (King’s College, London, United Kingdom)** described a paradox in which, although life expectancy is steadily increasing, healthy life years are declining. Modern medicine has contributed to this by focusing on the treatment of illness and bodily organs rather than redirecting energy towards adding value to people’s lives. The current system is centred on taking an individual medicalised approach, leading to fragmented care, inequalities, power imbalance between users and doctors, over-reliance on medicines with no impact on population mental health, and stigma; no wonder then that, across Europe, mental health has been described as an ‘abandoned illness’ affecting the young as much as the old and exceeding the existing capacities of health systems.

In Iceland, where mental ill health was increasing at an alarming rate in young people over the last 15 years, the realisation that social causes impact on mental health has led to the adoption of a public health mental approach that has generated very positive results. The latter does not focus on treating illness, but rather it looks at how children’s mental health develops. It seeks to provide children with quality time spent with parents (e.g., joint meal times), to provide safe playgrounds and educational settings and many related measures. It includes investing in health promotion, health literacy, non-medical early interventions, and building resilience in populations – salutogenesis. The combination of individual with collective public health approaches can be highly effective, but a paradigm change is required to allow the two to work in synergy. This means developing different concepts, approaches, and a re-organisation of mental health care. As Jim van Os explained, even in the Netherlands this is very challenging given the fragmentation of different care domains and the strong vested interests of stakeholders including mental health professionals and the pharmaceutical industry.

All relevant stakeholders have to be convinced to work together collaboratively in a public mental health ecosystem based on shared values of co-creation and introducing qualitative differences. By adopting a contextual view of mental distress, huge increases in care capacity can be achieved, not least by working in groups. However, each country will experience its own particular challenges in bringing stakeholders together given the different structures and cultures of Europe’s mental health systems.

04

ROGIER HOENDERS

INTEGRATIVE PSYCHIATRIST

“Combining conventional psychiatry and lifestyle interventions”

Rogier Hoenders, head of research and clinical affairs at Lentis Center for Integrative Psychiatry (CIP), an outpatient clinic in Groningen (Netherlands), focused on turning the growing mental health system crisis into an opportunity for creating change. Not only is the current system broken - operating at capacity limit and unable to cope with high costs, staff shortages and burnout, and long waiting lists - but it is one-sided in its exclusive focus on medication and talking therapy. According to WHO data, medical care interventions only contribute marginally to creating health (11%), which is mostly determined by behaviour (36%) and social circumstances (24%). However, currently the entire focus is on the 11%.

Breaking with established concepts and practices, Lentis CIP strives to empower its patients to become active agents in their own recovery; it does so by striving to offer “the best of both worlds” by applying a mixed approach that combines conventional psychiatry with lifestyle interventions. Its holistic philosophy encompasses biological, psychological, ecological and spiritual elements. Patients become aware of physical and mental health interactions and develop an understanding of the many social, emotional and physical challenges that influence health and wellbeing every day. By being mindful of these challenges, and making use of specific tools facilitating mutual and self-care, patients are able to adapt and build up resilience, leading to concrete mental and physical health benefits. Health and wellbeing are by definition static and idealised concepts, focused on the absence of sickness and of psychological problems and treating symptoms. In contrast, resilience is a dynamic notion that allows for self-regulated action.

The tools applied at Lentis CIP include many ‘common sense’ shifts such as healthy nutrition, non-competitive physical exercise, mindfulness, stress management (e.g., yoga), adequate sleep, and stopping smoking and alcohol. Crucially, they are complemented by neuroplasticity techniques to support the desired change in awareness. The aim is to create a stronger sense of coherence and meaningfulness leading to improved health, which is the basis of salutogenesis. In this paradigm, the interplay between individual behaviour and social circumstances is assigned a much more important role as a determinant of health.

05

ROGIER HOENDERS

INTEGRATIVE PSYCHIATRIST

“Combining conventional psychiatry and lifestyle interventions -2-”

Lentis CIP patients are long-time sufferers with severe and therapy-resistant mood-, anxiety- and trauma related disorders and comorbidity. By combining four elements (conventional psychiatry; lifestyle medicine; natural medicines; advice on the use of TCIM), and ensuring that staff also embody this approach, the integrative care model offered by Lentis CIP results not only in high patient satisfaction, less pathology, more resilience, wellbeing and daily functioning of patients. Importantly, this is backed by the health outcome data.

Holistic policies and investments in public health are required that enable individuals to make healthy choices (such as taxes on junk food, investing in health literacy, activating community and peer support) and that recognise the interconnection between different parts of the body, as well as between society and individuals.

GUSTAV DOBOS

PROFESSOR OF COMPLEMENTARY AND INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE

“*Mind-body medicine for improved mental health*”

Dr Gustav Dobos, Professor of Complementary and Integrative Medicine at the University of Duisburg-Essen (Germany) introduced the audience to mind-body medicine (MBM), a therapeutic approach focused on mindfulness-based lifestyle modification resilience training. This includes various disciplines such as meditation, yoga, physical exercise, healthy nutrition (adoption of a Mediterranean plant-based diet) and social support. In combination, these interventions enable patients to “develop a thick skin” to better cope with unexpected external events.

Dobos reported that up to half of primary care patients suffer from somatoform disorder (a mental health condition causing physical bodily symptoms in response to psychological distress) and that women aged 18-24 are displaying the lowest level of mental wellbeing. Existing evidence confirms that anti-depressant drugs work for fewer than 50% of patients, with waiting lists for psychotherapy sessions steadily growing. MBM provides a complementary, effective way to reduce the probability of depression. Quoting Antonovsky, Dobos argued that happiness can be seen as the ability to deal with life’s challenges and accept one’s life situation. A 2023 Harvard study on adult development concluded that leading a good and happy life is the result of being able to forge strong relationships with friends and loved ones.

Operating along the illness-wellness continuum of salutogenesis, complementary therapies for depression can easily be integrated into daily living. The nutritional psychiatry element is particularly popular among patients as it exerts a palpable effect on mental health.

ANNA PAUL

PHD MEDICAL SCIENCES/HEALTH SCIENCES

“*Mind-body medicine for improved mental health -2-*”

Dr Anna Paul from the Clinic for Complementary and Integrative Medicine in Germany KEM I Kliniken Essen-Mitte complemented this presentation by describing the benefits of adopting a group-based, prevention-focused MBM approach that respects and enhances each person's capacity for self-knowledge and self-care, empowering patients to recognise and use their own mental resources.

For example, unpleasant physical reactions to specific sensory experiences commonly trigger negative mental effects; the latter can, however, be avoided by ensuring that the body does not react in the first place. Interactive group therapies led by well-trained, transdisciplinary healthcare teams support patients by “unlearning” unwanted responses and lowering their stress levels. The MBM model offers a scalable holistic approach.

The benefits in mental and physical resilience are increased when applied from a very young age. The German Ministry of Education recognises the importance of this programme and already finances a number of MBM programmes.

08

DEFINING A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH

Commenting on the presentations, **Véronique Wasbauer (Principal Adviser for non-communicable diseases at the Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety)** confirmed that mental health in Europe is worsening at an unprecedented rate, with 50% of young people reporting unmet needs and high levels of depression. In her 2022 State of the Union address, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen confirmed a new mental health initiative announced at the Future of Europe Conference; repeated calls for action issued by the Parliament also contributed to making it a top priority.

Wasbauer explained that the recent Call for Evidence on the forthcoming Commission Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health included concepts such as taking a person-centred-approach and resilience. In the Commission's Healthier together – EU non-communicable diseases initiative, which comprises mental health and neurological disorders, health determinants constitute the first pillar. Integrating a holistic TCIM philosophy could be particularly interesting in the context of focusing on the patient. She added that the WHO is currently in the process of conducting a survey upon request by DG SANTE to map Member States' capacities for managing mental health conditions. On 21 April 2023, the Commission will be organising a stakeholder event gathering concrete ideas for action to further inform its work on the Communication.

STIMULATING COORDINATED ACTION

MEP Maria Walsh (EPP, Ireland) closed the meeting by describing how her work with two Mental Health groups in the Parliament – the Alliance for Mental Health and the Coalition for Mental Health and Wellbeing – has contributed to stimulating common action despite limited EU competencies in this area. More could be done to raise awareness of mental health, including by exchanging best practices and dedicating an EU Year to mental health. The forthcoming Commission Communication represents an important step forward in pushing Member States to put into place proactive support systems. More dialogue is needed to define a coordinated approach together with the Member States, for which there is cross-cutting political support in the European Parliament.

About the MEP Interest Group Integrative Medicine and Health

This group brings together Members of the European Parliament who work collectively to promote the inclusion of CAM as part of Integrative Medicine & Health in all possible European Parliament public health policy.

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PROGRAMME

Welcome words and introduction

MEP Sirpa Pietikäinen, Co-chair of the MEP Interest Group on Integrative Medicine and Health and member of the MEP Alliance of Mental Health and MEP Coalition for Mental Health and Wellbeing

Address by a member of the Interest Group on Integrative Medicine and Health

MEP Manuela Ripa

View of the European Commission

Véronique Wasbauer, Principal Adviser for non-communicable diseases, DG for Health and Food Safety

Towards mental healthcare without labels and of relevance to users

Jim van Os, MD PhD, Professor of Psychiatric Epidemiology and Public Health at Utrecht University Medical Centre in the Netherlands and Visiting Professor of Psychiatric Epidemiology at King's College, Institute of Psychiatry, London, UK

Integrative Psychiatry; the best of both worlds

Rogier Hoenders, MD PhD, integrative psychiatrist, senior researcher and director of the Lentis Centre for Integrative Psychiatry, Groningen, the Netherlands.

Mind-body medicine for physical and mental health (joint presentation)

Gustav Dobos, MD PhD, Professor of Complementary and Integrative Medicine, Head of the Department for Complementary and Integrative Medicine at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany

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Anna Paul, PhD, head of the Department of Mind Body Medicine (MBM) in the Clinic for Naturopathy and Integrative Medicine, section of Integrative Oncology and within the project of Integrative Psychosomatics at KEM / Evang. Kliniken Essen- Mitte, Germany

Reaction from Co-chair of the MEP Alliance for Mental Health

MEP Maria Walsh

*Q&A**Reaction from the Commission*

Véronique Wasbauer

Closing words

MEP Maria Walsh



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The Secretariat

EUROCAM hosts the secretariat of the MEP Interest Group on Integrative Medicine and Health

EUROCAM is the European foundation uniting umbrella organisations of patients, physicians, practitioners, and veterinarians in the sector of Traditional, Complementary and Integrative Medicine

EUROCAM is accredited as a non-state actor to the WHO Regional Office for Europe

EUROCAM promotes Integrative Medicine and Health in the European Parliament public health policy

More information:

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