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Mental Health as Global Health: A Joint World Health Organization-European Commission Initiative

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Abstract. This article describes a current international mental health conference and a rationale for this conference.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as cited by the United Nations Wire, the prevalence of mental health problems is expected to rise worldwide in the coming decades. Moreover, these problems are predicted to have serious social and economic consequences unless substantive action is taken.

To best proactively and reactively address these problems, the WHO and the European Commission are currently co-sponsoring an international mental health conference (April 22-24) in Brussels, Belgium. Attendees include representatives from close to 40 countries and from international organizations such as the International Labor Organization, the World Association for Psychosocial Rehabilitation, and the Council of Europe.

The conference, "Balancing Mental Health Promotion and Mental Health Care in Europe," is exploring ways to enhance mental health care resources and cooperation among participating nations and organizations. The meeting is also an opportunity for the WHO and the EC to collaborate on a mental health agenda for the region and establish common standards in mental health programs.

These explorations will confront significant challenges. According to WHO, sufficient data on the prevalence and burden of mental health problems are not currently available--even though such problems can impact everything from a family's economic security to larger societal issues such as productivity and childhood development.

In any case, WHO has advocated a number of recommendations: (1) urging homes, work places and communities to improve awareness about mental health problems and strengthen outreach efforts; (2) maintaining that schools should remain the crucial social institution for promoting mental health action and education; (3) encouraging greater partaking of a life-skills curriculum for school-age children that focuses on problem solving, critical thinking, communication, interpersonal skills, empathy and emotional coping; (4) working towards deinstitutionalization for those with mental health problems; and (5) supporting community demonstration projects--that include creation of community mental health services, outreach programs, primary care provider training, psychiatric training, and psycho-social rehabilitation--in 14 countries.

The WHO recommendations have much to commend them. They do not focus on the individual sans context. There is not a primary focus on individual biological and psychotherapeutic interventions that too often seem too much like meager and even immoral health ministrations within concentration camps--doing what's necessary to keep people functioning as transient contributors to a grossly pathogenic and pathological environment. There is still a much greater need to focus on huge power disparities, social inequities, and dehumanizing experiences and rituals that can be part and parcel today's globalizing economy. However, the track record of the EC, WHO, and UN on resolving this last

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need--also salient in matters of human rights, war, and peace--poses its own challenge to one's mental health. (See Chiu, T.L. (1996). Problems caused for mental health professionals worldwide by increasing multicultural populations and proposed solutions. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 24, 129-140; Henderson, A.S., & Jorm, A.F. (1997). Some contributions to the epidemiology of dementia and depression. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 12, 145-154; Jenkins, R. (1997). Nations for mental health. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 32, 309-311; Kapur, R., et al. (1997). An evaluation of threshold therapeutic communities in Northern Ireland. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 14, 65-68; Mental health: WHO, European Commission team up. (April 21, 1999). *United Nations Wire*, <http://www.unfoundation.org>; Stark, F. (1998). Does social psychiatry have a future? *International Journal of Mental Health*, 26, 3-26.)(Keywords: European Commission, World Health Organization.)