



# WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

**EXECUTIVE BOARD**  
**107th Session**  
**Provisional agenda item 9.4**

**EB107/27**  
**17 November 2000**

---

## **Mental health 2001**

### **Report by the Secretariat**

1. The Constitution of WHO states that “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. Mental health is a fundamental component of health through which one realizes one’s own cognitive, affective and relational abilities. A healthy mental disposition allows one to cope well with life’s challenges, to work productively and to make a positive contribution to one’s community.

2. Notwithstanding outstanding improvements in physical health in most countries, mental problems – often compounded by complex psychological and social factors such as war, displacement, human rights violations, gender discrimination, adverse social conditions and poverty – are currently a leading cause of illness and disability.

3. Cutting across age, gender and social strata, a growing body of evidence shows the impact of mental health problems throughout the world. They constitute five of the 10 leading causes of disability worldwide: major depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorders, alcohol dependence and obsessive compulsive disorders. Some 400 million people around the world suffer from mental or neurological disorders or from psychosocial problems such as those related to alcohol and drug abuse.

4. In the past, the prevalence and impact of mental disorders have been underestimated. In many parts of the world, mental health is still not acknowledged as important, and it remains a low health priority. Access to appropriate, cost-effective treatment and medications remains limited. There is an urgent need to give mental health greater prominence and to provide an effective response to problems because of:

- the huge numbers of people affected;
- the devastating socioeconomic impact of mental disorders; and
- the expected increase in mental disorders and their consequences owing to the ageing of the population, worsening social problems and civil unrest.

5. Three major events in 2001 will highlight mental disorders and their impact: World Health Day, whose theme will be mental health; the ministerial round tables at the World Health Assembly; and the publication of *The world health report 2001* also on the theme of mental health.

6. World Health Day (7 April 2001), with its theme “Stop exclusion – dare to care”, is intended to raise awareness and stimulate public debate. Many events will be held around the world aiming to dispel common myths about mental disorders and to call attention to the hidden burden of

stigmatization and discrimination associated with them. A World Health Day 2001 Web site is scheduled to be accessible in November 2000. It will provide ministries of health and nongovernmental organizations with information for planning an event, the media with audio, visual and other press materials, and the general public with details of scheduled events and information on mental health issues. To raise awareness among young people, a global school contest on mental health was launched in October with the support of UNESCO and other organizations.

7. The Fifty-fourth World Health Assembly will offer an opportunity for a strong commitment to be made to political action, with discussion of mental disorders and potential solutions through innovative policies, improved access to care and appropriate legislation. With mental health the theme of the round tables, ministers of health will have the opportunity:

- to exchange views on the impact of mental health problems and suitable interventions;
- to enhance public sector commitment to improvement of mental health; and
- to review mental health policies for rapid implementation in their countries.

8. *The world health report 2001* will seek to highlight the following:

- mental disorders are common, universal, a major source of disability in individuals and a burden to both families and communities;
- mental disorders can be prevented, diagnosed and treated; even though preventive measures and treatments exist, they are not available to most of the world's population;
- all countries urgently need to formulate and implement policies and programmes to deal with mental disorders;
- investment in research into mental health, neuroscience and social sciences is needed in order to increase understanding and to lead to new approaches to caring for people with mental disorders.

= = =