



## EUROPEAN COMMISSION CALL FOR EVIDENCE - A comprehensive approach to mental health *Draft Response by the European Cancer Organisation*

**The European Cancer Organisation (ECO)** welcomes the European Commission non-legislative EU initiative on mental health at work, with the aim of supporting the cooperation of Member States, European agencies such as the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU OSHA) and social partners to improve access to treatment and care of mental health patients, focusing on evidence-based innovative, promising and personalised approaches.

In addition, ECO welcomes the initiative to publish a specific Eurobarometer in 2023 with data and information on mental health in Europe and calls for the results of this research to be included, together with contributions from civil society, in the Occupational Safety and Health Summit planned under the Swedish Presidency in May 2023.

ECO recommends that the following 3 areas are given particular attention within a Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health

### **1. Improving access to psychological support services**

The need for improved access to psychological support is a high unmet need in cancer care across Europe.

Cancer distress can be defined as *“an unpleasant emotional experience of a psychological, social and/or spiritual nature which extends on a continuum from normal feelings of vulnerability, sadness and fears to disabling problems such as depression, anxiety, panic, social isolation and spiritual crisis”*<sup>1</sup>. Cancer distress is therefore a major factor of poor quality of life, whose wide-ranging detrimental consequences can affect not only cancer patients and survivors, but also their caregivers, families, partners and friends.

Beyond the trauma represented by cancer and its treatment, the burden of cancer distress can be reinforced by additional elements, including:

- Cancer stigma, particularly present in the case of certain cancer types, such as lung cancer;
- Fear of cancer recurrence, very frequently experienced by cancer survivors; and
- Anticipatory grief and survival guilt, faced by caregivers, families, partners and friends ahead of and/or after losing a loved one.

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<sup>1</sup> : Davies A, Dégi CL, Aapro M, Price R, Couespel N (2020). Free from Cancer: Achieving Quality of Life for All Cancer Patients and Survivors. European Cancer Organisation; Brussels



Against this background, psycho-oncology interventions have been demonstrated to be effective in improving psychosocial outcomes in cancer patients. Yet there is long-lasting under-recognition of psycho-oncology by health systems and chronic mismatch between generated care needs and allocated resources.

**ECO therefore urges that the forthcoming communication by the European Commission on a comprehensive approach to mental health give particular attention to the improved access of citizens to psychological care, including for cancer patients.**

**ECO recommends that access to psychological care across Europe be measured, and access to psycho-oncology, palliative care and supportive care services be measured as a sub-component of this. Such measurement activity could helpfully contribute towards eventual political agreement on access targets. Such a measurement initiative might, for example, be conducted via the commitment in the Communication to an EU level study.**

**ECO supports the emphasis provided in the consultation documentation towards early detection and screening of mental health problems. In the cancer sector, this could be supported by early, systematic and regularly updated psychosocial screening and monitoring in all phases of the cancer disease trajectory, including through digital means. ECO recommends funding programmes such as EU4Health and Digital Europe give support to initiatives and projects in this respect.**

## **2. Achieving improved workplace environments for psychological health**

In too many sectors of the European economy workers are being routinely placed under intolerable and persistent stress to the point of their psychological health being endangered. As a report of the European Cancer Organisation 'Working Against Cancer' has highlighted, Stress and impossible workloads are a clear and present risk to the safety and quality of care provided to cancer patients, and to the well-being of professionals. Inadequate preparation or administration of medicines, or inaccurate delivery of treatments such as surgery or radiation therapy, by stressed and over-loaded personnel, can pose the potential of significant patient safety risk. Further to their consequences on safety, persistent high levels of work-related stress also extensively affect cancer care providers' well-being, leading to psychological distress, compassion fatigue, exhaustion and burnout.

Beyond tackling fundamental root causes of such workplace scenarios, such as chronic workforce shortage, ECO also recommends greater incorporation of trained occupational psychologists within the workplaces of large institutions such as hospitals.

**ECO therefore urges the forthcoming communication by the European Commission on a comprehensive approach to mental health give consideration to how Commission support could be provided to support employers in safeguarding the mental health and wellbeing of their employees, with some specific consideration given to such needs in the health and cancer sectors.**



**Such support could include a study into the application of best practices across differing sectors of the economy, including the health and cancer care sector. Such a study might also investigate the fitness or otherwise of existing EU and national legislation in respect to protecting workers from psychological burnout.**

### **3. Committing to future support for those impacted by the War in Ukraine**

We applaud and note that the Commission's consultation document refers to Ukraine in several places in respect to the background political context for the consultation and proposed communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health.

From ECO's work with the Commission and many others on the War in Ukraine, it is highly evident that Ukrainian cancer patients are fighting a double psychological battle, against their diagnosed cancer, and the trauma of living through the present War.

We therefore noted that section B of the consultation document 'What does the initiative aim to achieve and how?' does not include reference to Ukraine within the 6 bullet points on scope.

**ECO strongly recommends the inclusion within the Communication of long-term<sup>2</sup> commitment to helping to meet the mental health needs created by the War in Ukraine, including for Ukrainian cancer patients.**

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