

“Stronger and Better Together” Mental Health Conference May 13-17, 2024 in Athens



A remarkable 5-day conference and training on mental health was successfully organized by the Hellenic National Public Health Organization (NPHO) from May 13-17, 2024, in the framework of the Joint Action ImpleMENTAL.

The conference was scheduled to be aligned with the European Mental Health Week, which this year adopted the message “Stronger and Better Together,” setting a new benchmark for similar future events. The event highlighted the value of a comprehensive program that effectively combines education, research, knowledge, and information exchange, as well as networking and collaboration among professionals who coordinate their work together in order to promote mental health in the community.

The conference was attended by a total of 102 participants; including physicians, nurses, psychologists, other healthcare professionals, peer experts, sociologists from Mental Health Services of Hospitals and Community Mental Health Services of the National Health Care System of Greece, as well as from Urban Non-Profit Mental Health Organizations, psychologists and sociologists from municipalities, representatives of patient and family associations, the Ministry of Health, and officials from the 1st Regional Health Authority of Greece.

The audience was informed about JA Implemental and the progress it had made so far by implementing pilots and selected best practices. Additionally, participants were updated on the overall current state of mental health in Greece and shared their experiences from their everyday practice, and could take part in a training on modern models of community-level care management kept by foreign and Greek experts.

The conference was opened by Prof. Christos Hadjichristodoulou, president of the National Public Health Organization (NPHO), who emphasized that the exchange of best practices, as pursued within the framework of the Joint Action ImpleMENTAL, is not only useful but also particularly timely for Greece, as the reform of the mental health services system is imminent. Deputy Minister of Health Mr. Dimitris Vartzopoulos, in his written message to the conference participants, pointed out that he expects the Joint Action to provide “valuable information and presentations” to support “further reform of the national mental health systems of Greece”.

Mr. Dimitrios Paraskevis, Professor of Medicine at the University of Athens and member of the Board of Directors of the NPHO, stated: “We live in an ever-changing world, where international crises stemming from economic instability or global conflicts, health crises and climate change create the conditions that bring mental health to the forefront,” emphasized.

Ms. Vasileia Konte, coordinator of JA ImpleMENTAL outlined the goals of the Belgian best practice on transformation of mental health services, and underlined the aim of the national (Greek) implementation, which is focusing on enhancing collaboration among various mental health structures; defines pathways of care and promotes comprehensive care for users of mental health services, which are user-centred, human rights-based and recovery-oriented and is expected to contribute to the national plan to reform mental health systems.

Ms. Konte also noted that the organization of this multifaceted event with physical presence was a strategic choice for the Greek organizers: “Personal contact enhances commitment and participation, facilitates the creation of a supportive and collaborative community involving all stakeholders and is therefore critical for promoting mental health.

For the continuation of education and the exchange of opinions and ideas, an e-training educational platform was developed, which will serve for training and networking among other healthcare regions and mental health sectors,” concluded Ms Konte. Ms. Lily Peppou, psychologist and member of the Greek team noted that “It is the first time that all

stakeholders of a region are jointly trained, and discussed a wide range of topics that are key for their daily practice”.

Dr. Anna Paradeisioti, Director of Mental Health Services Directorate, SHSO (State Health Services Organisation Cyprus) presented the mental health system transformation and national implementation in Cyprus undergoing in relation to JA ImpleMENTAL. The reform focuses on defining pathways of care for transition from adolescent to adult mental health services and from inpatient to community mental health services. The sustainability of the pilot activities carried out in the framework of JA ImpleMENTAL is ensured as the results have been embedded in the new national mental health strategy in Cyprus. The implementation strategy, the management and monitoring tools provided by the NPHO Coordination team have been extremely useful for organizing the implementation process and successfully transferring best practices to Cyprus. “These tools define specific steps, assign responsibilities and document enablers, barriers and lessons learned, which are described and used within the PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act) cycles to improve the intervention’s quality” - highlighted Dr. Anna Paradeisioti.

A major advantage of the conference was the presence of trainers from the renowned Mario Negri Institute: “We came here not so much to strengthen the academic background of professionals, but to focus on the practical application of theory, knowledge, and experience at the community level, so that trainees can effectively help those who are suffering” explains Dr. Angelo Barbato.

Dr. Barbara D’Avanzo, also from Mario Negri Institute stressed the concept of teamwork. “We need teams of many and different specialties, where each professional feels like a team member, plays their role, but also has the flexibility to change roles if required. Additionally, the patient must somehow be integrated into the team, as everything is done for the patient’s good, with their cooperation. The second and very important point is the existence of a personalized treatment plan, which is the result of a common thinking about the patient, utilizing the patient’s views on what should and can be done. It is a comprehensive, shared understanding of the team regarding the problem, what is feasible, how it can be achieved, with what resources, in how much time, and with the participation of which professionals.”

Synergies in EU mental health projects are crucial for addressing common challenges, optimizing resources, and sharing best practices. These collaborations at a national level enhance support for vulnerable groups, leading to more effective and efficient mental health interventions.

Ms. Marina Zanchi, Director of the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA), visited the conference venue and participated in the proceedings. She also had a meeting with the General Secretary of Public Health of the Ministry of Health, Ms. Fotini Kaliva. The Director of HaDEA was accompanied by Ms. Telea and M. Margetidis, who were part of a broader

delegation from the Agency, visiting Greece to inform stakeholders about the different EU funding programmes managed by HaDEA.

Ms. Zanchi described the conference organized by NPHO as “a relevant milestone in line with the chosen theme for this year’s edition of the European Mental Health Week” and also underlined the importance to “create synergies among EU funded projects so as to share best practices and connect diverse beneficiaries”, and Ms. Telea was impressed by the professionalism of the Greeks participating in European programs.

WHO also had a notable presence at the conference. Ms. Jennifer Hall from the WHO Athens Office for Quality of Care and Patient Safety represented WHO/Europe. She emphasised the synergy in the field of mental health between the work of WHO/Europe and the JA ImpleMENTAL, and stressed the success of the so far organised joint events and the trainings.