## Policy makers, scientific experts and industry join expertise to address mental health at the workplace

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**Gastein, 4 October 2013**
There is an unmet need for tackling mental health issues in the workplace – in particular depression and alcohol dependence – policymakers and experts from across Europe stressed at the European Health Forum Gastein on 3 October. As recognized earlier this year by EU Health Commissioner Tonio Borg, “*Mental illness represents one of the major health challenges in the EU today."* (I) Poor mental health has serious impact in terms of productivity loss, estimated as up to €99.3 billion a year (II). Workers with mental disorder are absent from work more often and for longer periods, or are underperforming. (III) Furthermore, mental diseases lead to errors at work, loss of motivation, burnout, disciplinary problems and poor relationships with colleagues (IV).

These overwhelming facts and possible policy solutions were discussed at Gastein at a dedicated session sponsored by Lundbeck.  Speakers included George Christodoulou, President-elect of the World Federation of Mental Health, Don Shenker, Director of the Alcohol & Health Network, Olaf Tscharnezki, Medical Director of Unilever and Zinta Podniece, from European Commission’s DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

Participants highlighted the enormous productivity losses, due to absenteeism and ‘presenteeism’ – poor work performances due to excess stress and mental health problems – caused by mental disorders. People suffering from depression are likely to have difficulties in performing ordinary work and social activities. (XIII) Even very minor levels of depression are associated with enormous productivity losses (XIV). Data on alcohol consumption seems equally worrying. A UK study shows that between eight and 14 million working days per year are lost due to harmful alcohol consumption, and that alcohol caused up to 25% of workplace accidents (VI).

What can be done at EU and national level to reverse these facts in the current economic context? Promoting and investing in mental health programmes in the workplace have proven to lead to significant economic payoffs. Dr Christodoulou stated *“employers need to understand that this is a real problem affecting their business daily and that investing in mental well-being of their workers is cost-effective, as it will substantially increase their productivity”.*

Don Shenker presented an interactive tool to support alcohol use disorder screening and education at work ([www.e-drink-check.at](http://www.e-drink-check.at)). He stressed: *“it is crucial that the European Commission renew the EU Alcohol Strategy, based on an integrated policy approach which encompasses targeted measures on screening and brief interventions at relevant settings such as workplace”.*

Participants also highlighted the need for a new European Strategy on Health and Safety at Work, with targeted measures aimed to address the challenges posed by depression and alcohol dependence at the workplace.
Through an interactive iPad voting system, more than 40% of the audience indicated that renewing the EU Health and Safety at Work Strategy should be the main priority for the EU to tackle mental health problems in the workplace. In 2014, the European Commission will fund a EU-wide study aimed to assess the effectiveness of the current EU legislative framework to tackle mental health at the workplace, provide policy guidance and tools to help employers and employees prevent and detect mental health problems and support affected employees adequately.

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