

Recognising the challenges, adopting exceptional measures

The EU must find more innovative ways for its policies to have an impact on mental health, says **Adina Vălean**



Adina Vălean (EPP,RO) is chair of the European Parliament's Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) Committee

Nowadays, public health challenges are more and more complex and interlinked, which drives us to take a strategic approach to addressing them at all levels - individual, institutional, community, local or national. Coordinated initiatives are needed in order to integrate and ensure coherence between the many different sectorial policies, which are relevant to keeping individuals and populations healthy. This also applies to the field of brain disorders that, according to the WHO, account for 35 per cent of the burden of all diseases in Europe and are predicted to become the major medical need of the 21st century. Many of the most prevalent brain disorders are chronic diseases that affect patients over a long period of time and generally progress slowly. Among the different chronic diseases, mental health is a real public health challenge; an estimated 18.7 million EU citizens are expected

to live with dementia by 2050. Depression and anxiety are yet other examples of highly prevalent and disabling conditions - each year, 25 per cent of the European population suffer from depression or anxiety, up to 50 per cent of chronic sick leave is due to depression or anxiety and half of depression cases are untreated.

Recognising these challenges, the European Brain Council has recently published a study on the value of treatment. I had the pleasure of attending the launch conference where experts involved in the study highlighted the need for more investment into research on neurological and mental diseases and exposed the wide disparities between and within countries relating to detection, intervention

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and treatment. As Chair of the European Parliament's ENVI committee, I was particularly pleased to see that the findings emphasised the importance of early intervention and detection, which I find essential to reducing the burden on our healthcare systems. It has been well established that timely intervention brings measurable health gains

such as improved survival rates, reduced complications and disability, better quality of life and lower treatment costs.

There is a growing body of research demonstrating the impact of integrated care that treats both the brain and the body. Simultaneously treating behavioural and physical conditions leads to better control of depression, diabetes, and heart disease, and importantly contributes to reducing healthcare costs.



Psychiatric illness increases with patients that live with chronic medical illnesses and conversely, these chronic medical illnesses also increase in patients with psychiatric illnesses, particularly in those with major mental illnesses. Consequently, patients with these conditions have increased morbidity and mortality and managing their condition becomes particularly costly at societal level. But because of the way our service systems have evolved over time, the prevailing tendency has been to treat medical and psychiatric illnesses as if they occur in different domains. We now know that this is not true from a patient standpoint, and if we are going to have patient-centred care, it needs to encompass all of the needs encompassed within the patient's journey.

These challenges call for adopting exceptional measures and this brings

to my mind recommendations from the High Level Group on maximising the impact of EU Research and Innovation Programmes, led by former WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy. The recommendations focus on maximising the impact of future EU research and innovation programmes and call for adopting a mission-orientated approach to addressing global challenges. I was pleased to see that the aim to “understand and enhance the brain by 2030” is listed in the report as a potential health mission for the post-2020 EU Framework Programme for Research. We, in the European Parliament, support

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all actors from the EU Institutions, individual MEPs, and industry to further strengthen cooperation between member states and innovation through recommendations, guidelines, workshops, and the exchange of best practices, with the goal of improving the lives of patients affected by neurological brain disorders. I endorse this idea that we should find innovative and comprehensive ways with which policy can successfully contribute in preventing, treating and curing brain-related conditions.

While the goal is very ambitious, striving to understand the brain better and to be able to offer effective treatments for brain disorders is indeed a great gift that we can offer to future generations. It will also have positive implications on the EU's capacity to innovate and on economic growth which requires healthy brain-power.★

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EARLY DETECTION AND INTEGRATED HEALTH CARE ARE KEY TO TACKLING BRAIN DISORDERS, ARGUES DAVID NUTT

THE PARLIAMENT MAGAZINE'S THOUGHT LEADER

Imagine not being able to talk because your speech centres have been affected by a stroke. Or not being able to feed yourself because your arms are too weak due to Motor Neurone Disease. Or not remembering the names of your grandchildren because of advancing Alzheimer's disease. These are confronting thoughts, but they are also the very real challenges that are faced by millions of Europeans living with a brain condition – mental and neurological alike.

“We must take action to develop an EU-wide research and public health combined Brain Strategy”

Highly prevalent and disabling, brain disorders today will affect more than one in three Europeans during their lifetime. The European Brain Council (EBC) has been working for the past 15 years to reduce the burden of brain and mental ill health through our project work and studies, generating and supporting evidence based approaches.

One of them is the EBC milestone study on the “Value of Treatment for Brain Disorders” (VoT), published in June. In the past, healthcare systems were primarily hospital-focused. Considering the causes, effects and co-occurrence of chronic conditions as well as current health reforms, health systems transformation towards a more holistic and patient-centred care approach is underway in Europe. The VoT study looked at how to address this by adapting care pathways to the needs of the patient rather than those of the system. We have done this through case study data analysis covering a wide range

of neurological and psychiatric disorders. These disorders are complex and inter-linked conditions that have a great number of common denominators and challenges. This is why it is essential to manage them in a more seamless and coordinated manner, as opposed to viewing them through separate medical ‘silos’. The study identified the major unmet needs and causes for treatment gaps and examined health gains and the socio-economic impact resulting from best health interventions.

Our findings recommend prevention, early detection and integrated health care interventions. They also recommend more research to understand the causes of brain disorders. We must take action to develop an EU-wide research and public health combined Brain Strategy. And we must make the best use of existing resources and establish a European Brain Research Area

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that can address brain and mental health in a comprehensive and collaborative way. This should, in turn, feed into national efforts and result in the development of National Brain Plans, mirroring successful national strategies in other areas such as cancer or diabetes. We are already devising the next phase of the study that will see the enlargement of its scope but most importantly, we are rolling out the study's recommendations at the national level. We invite you to visit the VoT page where you will find more information and we encourage you to partner with us in implementing its results braincouncil.eu/vot

David Nutt is president of the European Brain Council