

IHI JU Science & Innovation Panel (SIP)

Recommendation to the Governing Board

THEME – MENTAL HEALTH

Given the rising of mental health issues in the last years, where COVID-19, geopolitical conflicts, economic crises, climate change and rising living costs have exacerbated already poor levels of mental health in Europe, particularly among children, adolescents and vulnerable groups, prioritising mental health research and innovation is key.

Priority setting for research on mental health and brain health remains a challenge since there are more than 200 types or forms of mental health disorders. It is therefore essential to review the current research landscape including the ongoing EU research portfolio in mental health and to identify open research questions, which could be addressed within IHI, taking into consideration the IMI legacy in mental health and the specificities of this EU Joint undertaking.

The recent developments within the EU policy arena highlight the need to consider mental health as a transversal theme when preparing future calls.

The SIP acknowledged the following pressing issues in this field:

- Low accessibility to mental health services across Europe due to long waiting times, fear, costs and professionals' availability, affecting even more children and adolescents
- Treatment gap due to delayed detection and diagnosis and outdated paradigm of neuropsychiatry for contemporary patients' needs (e.g., symptoms-based vs diagnostic)
- Impact on children with 20% of children experiencing mental health issues in school years and children growing up anxious due to bullying, schoolwork, and loneliness (explore existing initiatives such as the CAMHI project¹)
- Insufficient resources and inadequate working conditions for mental healthcare staff
- Insufficient and/or fragmented data across EU to inform evidence-based decisions

Since mental health is a complex phenomenon, determined and influenced by a wide range of factors (individual, social, environmental), there is a need to:

¹ The project is aiming to enhance child and adolescent mental health care capacity and help to strengthen the infrastructure for the prevention, assessment, and treatment of mental health struggles faced by children and adolescents across Greece; <https://camhi.gr/en/>

- explore factors allowing identification of overlaps between syndromes, including differentiation strategies based on different factors such as genetics, post-viral exposition, environmental factors, etc.
- investigate common features in larger groups of patients affected by the consequences of poor mental health, including prevention strategies
- assess digital technology in supporting workforce mental health and resilience (e.g., explore existing initiatives such as the PROSPERH project²)

Applicants should be encouraged to partner with the wider health tech and academic and professional associations beyond neurology, psychiatry and psychology dealing with mental health matters (e.g., occupational specialists, social workers, school counsellors...) and explore the role and place of social media.

The SIP would recommend exploring the following issues and themes in MH:

- use of digital tech on MH of children (consider programs presented at the RTD Mental Health policy event of 18/02/2025)
- consider regulatory qualification of digital measures building on existing projects (e.g., IMI2 – IDEA FAST³), relevant published recommendations⁴ and tools (e.g., Advancing Digital Mental Health Innovation Report⁵)
- new therapeutics for MH including psychedelics (link with the PAREA project⁶)
- addressing trauma and psychology in PTSD
- improve understanding of MH with PROMS and PREMS for better prevention
- addressing epidemic of kids with ADHD by looking at its aetiology but also at the potential diagnostic disparities leading to differences in prevalence
- impact of poor screening and diagnosis of specific learning disabilities (dyslexia, dysgraphia...) on MH of children (e.g., diagnostic tools have poor psychometric properties, there is high inter-rater variability, etc.)
- need to critically appraise better psychometrics and develop more competencies in the field (EQ 5D widely used), explore the value of other existing tools and if possible, by developing efficacy markers

² <https://www.prosperh.eu/>

³ <https://idea-fast.eu/>

⁴ Akre, S., Seok, D., Douglas, C. *et al.* Advancing digital sensing in mental health research. *npj Digit. Med.* **7**, 362 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41746-024-01343-x>

⁵ https://reaganudall.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/Advancing%20Digital%20Mental%20Health%20Innovation%20Report_0.pdf

⁶ European Union's Horizon Europe programme to study psilocybin to treat psychological distress in people with progressive incurable illnesses requiring palliative care; <https://parea.eu/>

- use of predictive analytics and real-time monitoring (e.g., wearables, digital footprints) to detect suicidality in at-risk youth; explore the effectiveness of AI-driven crisis intervention and text-based mental health support.

Since psychotropics are increasingly used in paediatrics, often as off-label medicines, the efficacy and safety are not always granted in clinical practice compared to indications authorized in adults. Safety signals in children and adolescents could potentially be of interest within the scope of the topic on AI for pharmacovigilance.

The SIP is of the opinion that mental health of children is a public health priority and is recommending to already include children in the currently drafted text addressing mental health in the 2025 two-stage call.

The SIP would recommend that any call in MH should include a paediatric component and believes that it would be of interest to industry seeing the lack of data regarding treatments in children.

The SIP believes that the momentum around mental health is high with continuous developments and initiatives being launched. Mental health should therefore continuously be discussed within the IHI Science Plan and call planning.