END HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS

December 10: International Human Rights Day

Geneva - The World Health Organization (WHO) is dedicating International Human Rights Day, 10 December, to people with mental disorders and the all-too-prevalent violations of their basic human rights. People with mental disorders face an alarming range of human rights abuses in countries throughout the world, yet there are proven ways to dramatically improve the situation.

Misunderstanding and stigma surrounding mental ill health are widespread. Despite the existence of effective treatments for mental disorders, there is a belief that they are untreatable or that people with mental disorders are difficult, not intelligent, or incapable of making decisions. This stigma can lead to abuse, rejection and isolation and exclude people from health care or support. Within the health system, people are too often treated in institutions which resemble human warehouses more than places of healing.

"There are still far too many violations of the human rights of people with mental disorders. However, too often both the health and human rights agendas overlook these problems, and as a result, they slip between the cracks," said Dr LEE Jong-wook, Director General of WHO. "We have solutions to reverse the situation, in rich and poor countries alike. I urge countries, international organizations, academia, the healthcare and legal sectors and others to take a hard look at the conditions of people with mental disorders and take action to promote and protect their rights."

To mark International Human Rights Day, WHO is drawing attention to the problems and the solutions in a new online photo essay: 'Forgotten People: Mental Health and Human Rights', which highlights some of these human rights violations, and gives examples of how they can and must be stopped.

More than 450 million people throughout the world have mental, neurological or behavioural problems. Yet the majority of these people do not receive human rights protection or appropriate mental health treatment and care because of the low priority given to mental health. For example, 64% of countries do not have any mental health legislation, or, that which exists is out-of-date. Much existing mental health legislation fails to protect the rights of people with mental disorders; 30% of countries lack a specified budget for mental health, 20% spend less than 1% of their total health budget on mental health.

More and more countries are modernizing their mental health policies, services and laws, however. The health authorities of around 30 countries have recently joined the new WHO Mental Health Policy Project: Addressing Needs, Improving Services (MHPP). This project provides countries with guidelines, particularly the WHO Mental Health Policy and Service Guidance Package and WHO Resource Book on Mental Health, Human Rights and Legislation, as well as
training and support, in order to improve access to high quality care in the community, end cruel and abusive treatment, eliminate stigma and discrimination, promote and protect human rights, and ultimately improve the lives of people with mental disorders.

“There has been a growing commitment to human rights in some of these policy and legal reform efforts,” said Dr Michelle Funk, Coordinator, Mental Health Policy and Service Development at WHO. “However an enormous amount of work remains before us. We must continue to do everything in our power to end human rights violations, discrimination and stigma.”

The photo essay, ‘Forgotten People: Mental Health and Human Rights’, and supporting WHO mental health and human rights activities are undertaken with support from the Geneva International Academic Network (GIAN/RIUG) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, as well as the collaboration of the University of Geneva.

**Additional examples of human rights violations of people with mental health disorders**

Some people are isolated and locked in cage-like rooms or restrained to their beds for extended periods of time with little or no human contact. Others are subject to the misuse of psychotropic medications. In some institutions patients lack proper clothing, clean water, adequate food or functioning toilet facilities. In many care situations, patients are not provided with a sense of purpose or community and are isolated from family, friends and opportunities for work, all of which are detrimental to improved mental health.

* Extracts from WHO photo essay Forgotten People: Mental Health and Human Rights at [www.who.int](http://www.who.int).

**Note to editors:**

The International Human Rights Day photo story ‘Forgotten People:Mental Health and Human Rights’, along with testimonials of abuse and personal, community and country examples can be viewed at: [www.who.int/en/](http://www.who.int/en/)


For further information, please contact: Dr. Michelle Funk, Coordinator, Mental Health Policy and Service Development, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, WHO/Geneva, Tel: 41 22 791 3855, Email: [funkm@who.int](mailto:funkm@who.int) or Jane McElligott, Communications officer, Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health, WHO/Geneva, tel: 41 22 791 3353, email: [mcelligottj@who.int](mailto:mcelligottj@who.int)