Name of County: The United Kingdom 

Name of Committee: World Health Organization

Topic Area: Social Stigma against Mental Ilness

Honorable chairs and fellow delegates,

Stigma against mental illness has devastating consequences for individuals with mental illness and their families. Empirical findings and qualitative evidence indicate that stigma against mental illness remains rampant in many nations and cultures, constituting a significant barrier to successful treatment, reducing key life opportunities, and predicting poor outcomes over and above the effects of mental illness. In this position paper we define stigma, examine relevant theoretical perspectives, summarise evidence regarding the pervasive negative impact of stigma on individuals with mental illness, and discuss underlying mechanisms. We focus in particular on assessment issues, highlighting the need for transcending explicit attitudinal measures of stigma, which are susceptible to social desirability concerns and are likely to underestimate true levels of stigma, to include unconscious/implicit indicators and direct behavioural appraisals. A primary goal is to facilitate means of accurately measuring stigma against mental illness as an important step toward reducing its pernicious effects.

Mental health stigma is summarised by the anti-stigma campaign group Time to Change as the set of negative attitudes, pre-judgements, prejudices and behaviour that can make it harder for individuals with mental health problems to live a normal life.

It includes, among other things, misconceptions about the risks posed to the public by those affected by mental health problems, and the use of pejorative or flippant language in describing mental illness and those affected by it. It may be exacerbated or perpetuated by the negative portrayal of mental illness in the media.

In recent years, MPs from across political parties have pledged their support for reducing mental health stigma.A backbench business debate in June 2012 was considered a watershed moment in tackling stigma when, for the first time, MPs spoke about their personal experience of mental health problems, and received cross-party support for doing so.

Despite recent advances in the treatment of individuals with severe mental illness, their full integration into society is hindered by lingering negative attitudes towards them. In this paper, a brief overview is provided on stigmatization towards individuals with mental illness, including its' impact on quality of life and self-esteem, as well as the factors which likely underlie it. Research is reviewed showing that lowered negative perceptions towards persons with mental illness are associated with previous contact with this population and with presentation of empirically-based information on the association between violence and SMI. Limitations of these findings are discussed with an eye towards developing improved techniques for reducing stigma.