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## **ARTICLE**

### **Fighting fears around mental illness**

View from the Chair, as published in the News Letter, Tues 22 October 2013 by, Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commissioner NI

I wouldn't be surprised if 2013 World Mental Ill Health Day (10th Oct) had escaped your notice, as it has had to contend with 26 other "World days" in October. These have ranged from the sublime, World Smile Day, to the ridiculous, World Pasta Day. However trite some subject matters might seem, such events, when appropriately organised, can provide us with an opportunity to reflect on how we approach the matter being raised.

This was the case when the Commission shared a platform with the NI Association for Mental Health (NIAMH) in order to promote awareness of mental health matters here in Northern Ireland. Research shows that roughly one in four of us will suffer from some form of mental ill health during our life-times, with almost 3 out of 4 of those coming from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Given this prevalence, it may surprise you to learn that in our Equality Awareness survey in 2011, more than one person in three who responded indicated that they would mind having someone with such a diagnosis as an in-law, with one in four expressing the same reserve for a work colleague or neighbour. This was the largest negative response returned in terms of people living with some form of disability, and is a negative attitude which has worryingly increased since our previous survey in 2008.

Despite the existence of strong disability legislation, people living with mental health problems continue to experience inflexible attitudes from service providers and employers. Some of this is no doubt due to the nature of the problem and the lack of public awareness of mental health issues. This cannot, however, be an excuse for inaction. Workplaces are among the most resilient spaces in our society. They have adapted, and in many cases lead the way in, promoting diversity in gender, political opinion and religious affiliation. There are some excellent examples of good practice in dealing with employees who are living with mental ill health, most of which see the development of inclusive practices as a benefit to be shared rather than a problem to be solved.

Soon we will be launching a Mental Health Charter together with our colleagues in NIAMH. This is only one practical way that you might become more involved in this challenging yet rewarding area of inclusive practice. We will be glad to work with employers, either individually or through employers networks, to develop integrated equality plans which can promote equality for disabled people in work. In this context, maybe you can share some of your good practice with us and allow us to promote this to a wider audience? If so please contact Paul Oakes, by telephone 028 90500694 or email [poakes@equalityni.org](mailto:poakes@equalityni.org)