Announcing the new European Toolkit to monitor Human Rights and General Health Care in Mental Health Facilities

What is the ITHACA Toolkit?
The Institutional Treatment, Human Rights and Care Assessment (ITHACA) Toolkit has recently been developed by a consortium from across 15 EU countries, funded by the EC. The ITHACA Toolkit provides a clear and practical way to monitor human rights and general health care in mental health facilities. The Toolkit was designed by services users, human rights experts, psychiatrists, psychologists and social scientists. It has been successfully field tested in 87 sites across 15 countries, covering a wide range of mental health care settings and can identify both human rights violations and examples of good practice in protecting, respecting and fulfilling the rights of persons with mental disabilities.

Strong service user participation
In developing the ITHACA Toolkit service users were consulted and employed at all stages. Over 100 service users participation in the focus groups which were conducted in each country. A key component of this consultation was to build service user capacity and involvement. In Finland, for example, eight service users were involved in conducting monitoring visits and testing the usefulness of the toolkit. As one of the service user researchers from Finland says *"The experience has been very rewarding and we have learned a lot. The starting point was to combine human rights monitoring with trying to have an effect on developing the services as well...I am even more convinced that it is really necessary to have users monitoring, evaluating and researching".*

The need for the ITHACA Toolkit in Europe
People in mental health institutions across Europe too often remain out of sight, with poor monitoring to assess the human rights and general health care of their residents. Such people are an extremely vulnerable population to neglect or abuse in relation to their basic necessities of life as well as their civil and political rights. The international community took an important step forward in securing and protecting these rights in passing the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006, which places the responsibility for meeting the needs of all people with disabilities (including those with mental disabilities) on society. Persons with disabilities are not *objects* of charity or welfare but *actors* with rights. Governments and societies need to create environments which encourage and enable vulnerable persons to assert their right to health, education, civil liberties and the protections afforded in international human rights documents. Examples of key issues that have been identified in our testing of the ITHACA Toolkit include: access to and involvement in the development of care plans, correspondence and visitors, and movement of treatment into the community

Role of clinical and social care staff
All members of society have a role to play in the protection, respect and fulfillment of human rights and in putting into practice the right to health of people with mental disorders and related disabilities. Clinical and social care staff have a particular responsibility to ensure that human rights are a priority and can:
1.   Advocate that their national policy makers sign, ratify and implement the goals and spirit of the CRPD
2.   Develop, use and improve monitoring systems with continuing input and development from service users
3.   Support local advocacy and support groups for service users
4.   Support the development of mental health care that progressively develops community based services

Language versions available
The ITHACA Toolkit is now available in the following languages: Bulgarian, Czech, Dutch, English, Finnish, German, Greek, Italian, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Romanian, Slovak, Turkish

Contact details and additional resources
For full details of the ITHACA Toolkit please go to our website at http://www.ithaca-study.eu/, or contact Graham Thornicroft at King's College London graham.thornicroft@kcl.ac.uk.

For more detailed background go to:
1. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (http://www.un.org/disabilities/)
2. Mental Disability Advocacy Centre (http://www.mdac.info/)
3. European Network of (ex-) Users and Survivors of Psychiatry (ENUSP) (http://www.enusp.org/).