WORKING GROUP ACTIVITIES’ REPORT

1. Aims and Development
At a global level, mental health and care is characterized by significant differences across countries. Digital mental health has gained momentum over the last decades as a set of tools and programs that could assist in filling existing gaps and upscaling public mental health services and practices. Digital mental health could assist with self-management, prevention, early recognition and intervention, treatment and care, and health promotion. To do so, digital mental health and care should be responsive to the specific national and regional needs to ensure its successful implementation and adoption. At the same time, the appropriate use of these digital tools and programs in mental health must be accompanied and supported by educational and training programs, high-quality research, and relevant policies, regulations, and guidelines.

The 2020-2023 World Psychiatric Association (WPA) Action Plan has described the need to improve psychiatric education and training in digital psychiatry as a “premier objective” of the WPA. The WPA Working Group on Digitalisation in Mental Health and Care was launched in 2021 to contribute to this objective. The Working Group, led by Wolfgang Gaebel (Germany) as Chairperson, Umberto Volpe (Italy) as Co-Chair and Rodrigo Ramalho (New Zealand) as Secretary, aims to contribute to digitally supplementing, supporting and improving digital mental health and care globally. The Working Group works alongside interested and skilled early career psychiatrists and internationally renowned experts with advisory functions according to the projects of the Action Plan.

The main projects, activities, and deliverables of the Working Group on Digitalisation in Mental Health and Care are presented below.

2. Educational Activities
The Working Group has developed and delivered educational activities at national and international levels. A training course on digitalization in psychiatry has been organized at the 22nd World Congress of Psychiatry, along with a scientific Symposium on worldwide digitalization in mental health and care, encompassing the implementation, the standardization of training curricula and cultural safety in telepsychiatry training. Prof. Gaebel also collaborated to develop the eMEN programme (2021-2023), a multidisciplinary cooperation platform promoting practical implementation of digital technology for improving mental health prevention, diagnostics, and treatment in North-Western Europe. Prof. Gaebel is also collaborating with the World Health Organization (WHO EURO) in a project aiming to digitally transform mental health systems of European countries (2022-2026). Prof. Volpe continuously delivered training courses on the practical implementation of telepsychiatry along international (European Congress of Psychiatry) and national (Italy, Romania) sites from 2020 through 2023. He also launched the first European Telepsychiatry Training Video Toolkit (2023). Dr. Ramalho delivered telepsychiatry training sessions in the Americas from 2020 to 2023. Leading a panel of psychiatrists from all WHO Regions, he also developed a protocol to guide the use of telepsychiatry during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Working Group has also organized a training course on digitalization in routine work conditions at the 23rd World Congress of Psychiatry, to be held in Vienna (Austria) from September 28-October 1, 2023.

3. WPA Position Statement on Digitalization in Mental Health and Care
At the request of WPA, the Working Group has delivered an official position statement on digital mental health and care (Appendix 1). The Position statement discusses the current global status of digitalization in mental health and care and the available clinical evidence of the most relevant psychiatric digital tools, including internet-based psychotherapy, digital therapeutics, digital phenotyping, extended reality, and artificial intelligence applications. Finally, the Position Statement also puts forward a set of 10 high-priority
recommendations to be addressed by mental health professionals, national and international scientific organizations, community leaders, policy makers, and other key stakeholders, such as service users’ organizations. These recommendations describe clear objectives for future initiatives promoting the implementation and adoption of digital mental health and care in routine psychiatric practice at a global scale.

4. Survey on Digitalisation in Mental Health and Care
The Working Group has developed an online survey addressed to all 145 WPA National Psychiatric Member Societies, with the support of all 18 WPA Zonal Representatives (Appendix 2a). The survey was set to assess the baseline status of digitalization worldwide, identify possible gaps in the availability and use of psychiatric digital tools, and adequately plan the next steps. The survey aimed to gather global information on digitalization in general and mental health care, digitalization policies, regulations and guidelines, administrative and reimbursement issues, education and training in digital psychiatry, and priorities for future actions. Based upon the main results of the survey (see Appendix 2b for selected findings), the Working Group is going to build a global map of resources and needs together with the WPA National Psychiatric Society Members, that will serve as a roadmap for future initiatives to be taken by WPA to help to reduce the digital mental health gap.

5. Publications
The WPA Working Group on Digitalization in Mental Health and Care has recently submitted for publication reports about its activities in internationally renowned scientific journals such as World Psychiatry (in press) and the Journal of Technology in Behavioral Science.

6. Outlook and Future Actions
The WPA Working Group on Digitalization in Mental Health and Care, within its given timeframe, developed the concepts, scope, and structure to guide its initiatives and delivered on three cornerstones of its workplan – education, baseline surveillance, and position statement for a digital roadmap (see the WPA Working Group on Digitalisation in Mental Health and Care webpage). One important consequential step would be missing if this work would not be followed through, leaving all the preceding work in vain. This next step is to develop a digital promotion and implementation strategy in cooperation with the WPA National Psychiatric Society Members who contributed to our work. We, the core members of the WPA Working Group on Digitalization in Mental Health and Care, are committed to continue supporting WPA in a high-level project of implementing global digital mental health and care according to country needs and in collaboration with country and zonal representatives and key relevant stakeholders. We are ready and pleased to discuss any options and requirements for this kind of important step forward, and we would also appreciate if given the chance to present and discuss on occasion of the WPA General Assembly on September 30, 2023.

Respectfully submitted,
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Appendices
Appendix 1: WPA position statement on Digitalisation in Mental Health and Care
Appendix 2a: Survey form
Appendix 2b: Survey report (selected findings)