

Edinburgh in April

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I had never been to Scotland until this week. So, it was especially a privilege to visit Edinburgh with professional colleagues and members of our Global Mental Health Program (GMHP) International Advisory Board Members to meet with the Minister for Mental Health and her exceptionally warm and inspiring team who are leading the charge in making mental health a top national priority.



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What's so exciting?

1. More than hot air. On our first afternoon in Scotland, we journeyed out to St. Andrews, and thanks to the gracious hospitality of one of our GMHP International Advisory Board members, a bagpiper welcomed us as we looked out over the oldest and most iconic golf course in the world. The bagpiper was divine. The North Sea was roiling. And on the Old Course of St. Andrews, golfers were concentrating on their swings despite the cold and rain. It is an image I will savor. But given that I am not a golfer, what lingers in my mind is the poetic foreshadowing provided by the Old Course of St. Andrews in terms of what Scotland is doing about mental health. It is a public golf course, open to all.

2. First Minister for Mental Health in Europe. Scotland is the first European country to designate a specific Minister for Mental Health. The clearly defined and dedicated leadership means that mental health is the absolute common denominator for all the work of the department, ensuring that it cannot be relegated to the shadows. The discussions led by John Mitchell, Principal Medical Officer, and Penny Curtis, Head of Mental Health and Protection of Rights Division, made it abundantly clear that they and their colleagues are keeping their eyes on the prize.

3. First Scottish Minister for Mental Health is a woman. With the establishment of the first Mental Health Minister, Scotland is also trendsetting in its nomination of Ms. Maureen Watt to fill this roll. Around the world women are underrepresented in high-level public office, representing 23% of members of parliaments globally. [Yet, we know that more diversity in leadership is good for politics and business.](#) Women bring different life experience to public office compared to men, and that impacts how they govern and what issues they prioritize, many of which are intimately linked to mental health and wellbeing.

4. Scotland Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027. Ms. Watt declared that, "As Scotland's first dedicated Minister for Mental Health, I have been driven by a simple principle - that we must prevent and treat mental health problems with the same commitment and drive as we do physical health." Her department's ten-year plan will serve as their north star. With 40 aspirational actions, they have goals that address the gamut of mental health issues. The level of coordination they have orchestrated to translate their aspirations into actions bodes well for this grand plan.

5. Tartan. The Scots are famous for their tartan plaids - crisscrossed horizontal and vertical bands in multiple colors. Beyond the golf course, St. Andrews is also famous for its university, the alma mater of the Prince William, Princess Kate, and Prince Harry. Unprepared for the weather, I ducked into a shop on the High Street to warm up. Partially because I was freezing and partially because it was Princess Diana's pattern, I couldn't resist purchasing a pink and blue tartan shawl. Having suffered immensely from an eating disorder, her story is a reminder that mental illness is common - even for royals.

With fervent hope that this was just my first of many visits to this northern most country of the United Kingdom, I am inspired by Ms. Watt and her team who have articulated an ambitious strategy to improve mental health understanding, education, prevention and care. May they draw strength from their grand history, and may they continue to pioneer a new future for mental health as a national priority. That would be like a hole-in-one on the Old Course of St. Andrews.