

# World Health Organization – The Question of Providing Mental Health Services to Developing Countries

## **Introduction**

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. Mental illness deprives an individual of the above mentioned qualities and is detrimental both to themselves and to the individuals around them. However, mental illness is still feared and misunderstood in many cultures. This results in an inadequate allocation of financial and human resources, especially in developing countries, to the recognition and treatment of mental illness. In the wake of World mental Health Day, which focussed on the theme of “investing in mental health”, the World Health Organization (WHO) will be considered how to adequately provide mental health services to developing countries. The WHO is aimed at appealing to all countries to increase their support for mental health services and in aiding them in this feat.

## **History**

Historically speaking, mental illness has been associated only with the idea of psychosis or madness. The severely mentally ill always stood out and therefore become the stereotype for mental illness as a whole. The milder and moderately mentally ill in society have many times not even been diagnosed as ill, and have remained untreated. While this concept has been prevalent around the world, it still remains particularly entrenched in developing countries.

This strong, entrenched fear of prejudice against the psychotic has resulted in ignorance and discrimination. In many developing countries, the idea of incarceration of mental patients in asylums is akin to the incarceration of criminals in prisons. In fact, mental hospitals and prisons are often built side by side, and directors of prisons are sometimes on the boards of mental hospitals.

This historic development has led to a lack of resources being effectively allocated to the appropriate diagnosis and treatment of mental illness in many developing nations.

The economic costs of mental disorders are also very substantial. In the United States, direct treatment costs are estimated to be around 2.5% of the gross national product, and indirect treatment costs are two to six times higher. In developing countries, families

are expected to bear a significant proportion of the economic costs due to the absence of publicly funded services.

All of these elements lead to a view that mental disorders are a burden on society, but with the development of good-quality mental health systems, people with mental disorders could contribute to the social and economic well-being of society and have an improved quality of life. The WHO currently has some projects that focus on the advocacy of this very fact. One of these is “The Quality Rights” project, which focuses on four core thematic areas: mental health policy and action plans, mental health legislation, inclusion of these in development programs, and supporting countries that take these actions. Another important project is “Mental Health in Emergencies”, which targets any populations exposed to extreme stressors such as refugees, internally displaced persons, disaster survivors, and terrorism or war-exposed populations.

### **Possible Solutions**

Any possible solutions to this problem would have to take into consideration all of the major elements mentioned above: policy and action plans, legislation, inclusion in development programs, and special attention to extreme stress populations.

Solutions must also be multi-level. There must be a system for referrals, support and supervision, as well as links to informal and community-based services in order to increase awareness. Education is the key in developing a future generation that is able to properly understand and cope with mental illness in society.

### **Points of Contention**

The major point of contention with this issue has to do with the perceptions of society on the matter of mental illness. As was mentioned above, the view that mentally ill persons are burdens on society is still prevalent in the developing world. What programs can be put into place to educate developing nations about mental disease?

Another point of contention is funding. The treatment of mental disorders is significant both on the national budget and on individuals if left to private means. However, it has also been noted that mentally ill individuals are excluded from the workforce. If included, these people would be able to make significant contributions to society. How can we ensure that the benefits of improved mental health care in developing nations are greater than the cost to provide these benefits?

## Resources

[http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9799241564359\\_eng.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9799241564359_eng.pdf)

- international mental health statistics per nation as collected by the WHO

[http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/policy/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/policy/en/)

- about the WHO's Mental Health in Development program

[www.who.int/mental\\_health/emergencies/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/emergencies/en/)

- about the WHO's Mental Health in Emergencies program

[http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2009/9789241598774\\_eng.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2009/9789241598774_eng.pdf)

- a document outlining the specific aspects that need to be addressed when it comes to reforming mental health in developing countries