Mental Health: Tackling the Challenges

Mental health is an integral part of general health and quality of life through which a person realises his or her full potential. Despite the close interrelationships of mental and physical health, mental health is largely neglected, including in the allocation of fiscal and human resources. The World Health Organization estimates some 400 million people in the world suffer from mental or neurological disorders or from psychosocial problems, such as those related to alcohol and drug abuse.1

Mental disorders represent more than 12% of the total burden of disease. However, the true extent of the problem is difficult to measure. Mental health problems tend to remain undiagnosed and unreported because of stigma and exclusion. About 24% of patients who seek primary health care suffer from some form of mental disorder.2

A majority of these patients (69%) usually present to health personnel with physical symptoms; consequently, many of them are not correctly diagnosed for mental illness and thus not treated.2

In most countries health care providers are not prepared to address the mental health needs of their patients. With proper training and supervision, health professionals could become more competent in identifying and treating mental disorders.

Mental health problems are common worldwide and their impact in psychological, social and economic terms is very high. We have the knowledge to prevent and treat many mental health disorders and to permit persons with mental illness to be socially and economically productive members of their community. Yet, societies still create barriers to the care and reintegration of people with such disorders.

Facts and Figures

- About one fifth of the world’s youth suffer from mild to severe mental health disorders.
- 400 million people in the world suffer from mental or neurological disorders.
- Mental disorders represent more than 12% of the total burden of disease.
- About 24% of patients who seek primary health care suffer from some form of mental disorder.
- 69% of patients with mental disorders usually present to physicians with physical symptoms and many of them are often not correctly treated.5
Risk factors for mental illness
Like many diseases, mental illness has risk factors that can be prevented or reduced. Understanding these risk factors provides a framework for strategies in mental health promotion and illness prevention. The main risk factors include adverse living conditions such as extreme poverty, war and displacement, biological predisposition, and stressful relationships at home or in the workplace. Abused women and children, victims of armed conflict, migrants and refugees are among the high-risk populations for mental illness.

Stigma of mental illness
Unlike those with physical illness, people with mental health problems are generally subjected to stigma, prejudice and exclusion from access to social services and health care. Stigma is often due to public ignorance about the underlying causes of mental health problems. One of the main challenges is to remove the stigma of mental illness so that people will talk freely about their emotional problems with health care professionals.

In some societies, people believe that evil spirits or a curse for some transgression cause mental health problems. People with mental illness are often believed to have ‘weakness in character’ or ‘immoral behaviour’. These myths about the cause of mental health problems are sometimes used to deny care and compassion or even to administer cruel treatment such as confinement, abandonment or isolation. As a result, people with mental illness suffer doubly: from their illness and from shame and social stigma. The challenge for nurses and other health professionals is to create an understanding of mental illness, an illness that has risks and is subject to prevention and treatment.

Strategies for nurses, NNAs and others
Despite advances in health care, the development of humanistic, holistic and scientific methods in mental health services have been relatively slow compared to other specialisations such as surgery. Nurses have a vital role in the promotion of mental health, prevention of mental illness and improving
access to care and services. To combat the stigma and fear of ‘madness’ and to promote a culture of care and compassion for people with mental illness, activities can include the following:

1. **Promote mental health and prevent illness** by collaborating with other professions and sectors through:
   - Public education on risk factors
   - Advocacy groups that support access to food, shelter, education and other resources
   - Positive parenting programmes
   - Life skills education
   - Child-friendly schools
   - Early detection
   - Referrals and treatment services
   - Early intervention for children with psychological problems

2. **Improve access to mental health care services**:
   - Support a network of community-based services
   - Increase outreach and informal support groups
   - Get involved in national mental health policies and plans
   - Focus on vulnerable populations
   - Integrate mental health into primary health care services
   - Lobby for allocation of resources for mental health promotion
   - Improve quality of mental health services
   - Lobby for a 24-hour crisis intervention service
   - De-institutionalise mental health services

3. **Stop exclusion and Dare to care**:
   - Talk openly about mental illness in the community
   - Educate the public about risk factors of mental illness and ways to reduce them
   - Protect human rights and ensure legislation to improve care and reduce stigma
   - Publicise mental health issues through events such as the World Mental Health Day, October 10 each year

4. **Promote community participation** in mental health services planning, operation and evaluation:
   - Lobby for citizen and consumer group involvement
   - Sensitise the community that mental health is the concern of the entire community
   - Support self-help programmes such as volunteer services
   - Train health care providers to be partners and facilitators of care
   - Encourage networking and mutual aid groups
• Hold briefing meetings and information exchanges with health providers and other sectors

5. **Influence policy makers and the public** about the importance of:
   • Mental health and the environmental and social risk factors
   • Increasing financial and human resources for mental health promotion, prevention and care
   • Creating healthy environments and caring societies that reduce stress and enhance well-being

6. **Address educational needs of health personnel in mental health issues:**
   • Use culturally sensitive curriculum models
   • Lobby for nurses and others as mental health managers, researchers, educators and role models in clinical settings
   • Provide continuing education for health care providers
   • Undertake research to determine effects of nursing interventions and health outcomes
   • Develop guidelines and other training materials

**Conclusion**

Nurses and other health professionals have a key role in promoting mental health, preventing mental illness and improving access to mental health services. They also have a role in educating the public and reducing stigma. Health professionals need to focus on reducing the treatment gap of mental health disorders. Advances have been made regarding new treatment and care, and on the causation, associations, characteristics and prevention of mental health problems. The benefits of this knowledge should reach all people with mental health problems, particularly the vulnerable populations.

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The **International Council of Nurses (ICN)** is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality nursing care for all and sound health policies globally.

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References

2 WHO (1998), Mental Disorder in Primary Care.
5 WHO (1998), Mental Disorder in Primary Care