Opinions on Mental health care in Malawi

Is Malawi getting mental health care right? by Thengo Kavinya

According to the World Health Organization, one in four people will suffer from a mental health problem at some point in their life.

The term ‘mental disorders’ is used to refer to a broad category of disorders, such as affective disorders (major depression, dysthymia) and different anxiety disorders (generalized anxiety disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, et cetera). Their essential features are disturbances in emotions, often accompanied by cognitive distortions such as excessive worry, negative thinking and by somatic expressions (unexplained medical symptoms that are often the presenting complaints in primary health care settings).

The WHO also says the lack of political support, inadequate management and overburdened health services have hampered the development of coherent mental health systems. Psychiatric patients are often abandoned by their families because of the stigma attached to mental health. Mental illness, despite centuries of learning and the ‘Decade of the Brain’, is still perceived as an indulgence, a sign of weakness. Self-stigmatisation has been described, and there are numerous personal accounts of psychiatric illness, where shame overshadows even the most extreme of symptoms.

Despite the occasional flurry, the scale and diversity of mental ill health has been seriously underestimated. Mental ill health is the largest group of disorders after cancers and cardiovascular disease. It is extremely difficult to complete our journey through life without experiencing periods of mental health problems. The World Health Organization emphasises the importance of mental health in developing countries but is Malawi prepared to offer vibrant health care to mental health patients.

Matthews Simbota (Student- Malawi College of Health Sciences)
Good mental health services should focus on providing patients with a both medicines and psychosocial care. In countries such as Malawi, the shortages of resources and skills result in patients only being treated with medicines and the lack of psychosocial care reduces the effectiveness of the treatment.

Steven Chilembwe (Clinical Officer)
I think there should be a joint initiative between the government and stakeholders to improve the wellbeing of mental patients. Its sad that these patients are usually sidelined but if they could be given proper care there could be a chance of another life so it is my plea to people who wish well to come forward and assist these people.

Joseph Munthali (Communications Officer)
I recommend that the Ministry of Health could have increased its allocation towards this illness as it seems that its neglected and priority is put to the usual illnesses such as HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis. So it ends up that people with mental illnesses have little or no care offered to them at all and in the end they are just discharged without proper assistance.

Andrew Kampingo (Clinical Officer)
We have been too patient and delayed for too long in reform and investment in mental health care. While the priorities have been clear for some time, it will require strong national leadership and accountability and much more flexible models of funding to implement reform that impacts on the lives of everyday people.

Hope Phiri (Student Malawi Polytechnic)
The silence that surrounds mental ill health is being broken through initiatives such as meetings with mental health professionals and we now seem better able to acknowledge the need for personal and community support in the face of tragedy. The key problem is that this has not yet translated into increased investment in mental health care.

Alex Kausiwa (Transporter)
The government could have put in an initiative to train more psychiatrists (mental health doctors) as the disorder is increasingly growing by day. We find that there are a few of these in hospitals and this is a danger because the work involves quite some time and its greatly difficult to be administered by a few.

Emmanuel Phiri (Science Reporter)
Government can set up Community Mental Health Teams to support people with mental health problems living in the community, and also their carers. The team may include a community psychiatric nurse (CPN), a psychologist, an occupational therapist, a counsellor and a community support worker, as well as a social worker. One member of the team will be appointed as your care coordinator, to keep in regular contact with patients in the communities.