

Mental health problems in Ethiopia: efforts for better evidence and services

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In Ethiopia mental health issues are gaining more attention in the last two decades because of better quality and increasing number of evidences generated from clinical as well as field research. In a country where malnutrition and infectious diseases are claiming thousands of young lives however mental health problems have not obtained top priorities. The number and diversity of evidences necessary for decision making is perhaps not yet adequate considering the challenges faced by the researchers to advance the state of knowledge in the local context. Insufficient funding, brain drain and limited research infrastructure are major challenges (1).

The facilities and human resource available for mental health care have been grossly inadequate despite the high burden of mental health problems in the problem (2). However, efforts made by dedicated professionals in collaboration with the Government of Ethiopia and relevant internal and external agencies have helped to develop substantial capacity to alleviate those problems in the field, though much remain to be done to have a satisfactory mental health services in Ethiopia.

Because of the several initiations to expand psychiatric training at both undergraduate and graduate levels to produce the badly needed psychiatry care providers and researchers in the last few decades have started bearing fruits and the number of professionals in the field has been increasing steadily. Various levels of health workers from health extension workers to nurses and to doctors were trained to provide clinical care. The opening of psychiatry specialty training at Addis Ababa University was crucial; the number of psychiatrists in the country increased by several-fold by now. To

improve research skills short term-training and graduate level research training have been offered in country and abroad. Those efforts have resulted in increased availability of psychiatric care in the country and the number of research output. The quality of available services improved substantially owing to better trained and informed professionals. The coverage of services however is not yet comparable to the needs of the society (2).

Another major challenge in advancing mental health research in developing country setting is the lack of culturally appropriate valid diagnostic and screening research instruments. Most of the research instruments are developed in the Western Countries and using those instruments directly in a culturally different population posed significant challenge (1). Even when the studies are conducted with careful considerations the scientific validity of results using those instruments has been doubted. Thus, efforts must continue to develop culturally appropriate mental health assessment tools to further advance our understanding and provide better services in our context.

The articles published by Abdulreshid Abdullahi Bekry in the Ethiopian Journal of Health Development (4,5) exemplify the continued effort in advancing better understanding of mental health problems in Ethiopia. The continued validation and translation of the instrument of assessing the various mental health problems in the local context is of paramount importance in improving related services and encouraging further research.

As more and better evidences are available and the number of trained professionals increase the

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Government and other stakeholders would be encouraged to give the necessary attention to the mental health problem that is affecting millions of citizens in the country. With increasing economic challenges and abuse of substance, particularly *Khat*, the burden of mental illness will be formidable in the near future. Consorted effort need to be made by all concerned in order to prevent and limit the damage to the society by taking the necessary action timely and appropriately. The professional associations need to be more active in advocating and promoting for more and better clinical and public health services.

Reference

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