MENTAL HEALTH INTEGRATION INTO PRIMARY HEALTH CARE: A CRUCIAL PUBLIC HEALTH INTERVENTION FOR PEOPLE-CENTERED AND RESPONSIVE HEALTHCARE

A PROGRAMME REVIEW NOTE BY Emmanuella OHANYIDO

Mental Health Integration into Primary Health Care: A Crucial Public Health Intervention for People-Centered and Responsive Healthcare
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"Poor access to mental health care in many African countries due to low government investment is one of the major hurdles to prevention and care services. On average African governments allocate less than 50 US cents per capita to mental health, well below the recommended US$ 2 per capita for low-income countries."- Africa Regional Office, WHO 12th October, 2022[1]

BACKGROUND

The West African Institute of Public Health (WAIPH) recognizes the growing recognition of mental health's critical role in achieving global development goals, as evidenced by its inclusion in the sustainable development objectives. Despite this recognition, there remains a significant disparity between the number of individuals in need of mental health care and those who have access to it. Adequate treatment coverage is still low, and additional funding is necessary to promote access to effective treatments and high-quality mental health care. One of the major barriers to mental health care is the stigma surrounding mental illness, which impedes individuals from seeking help and support. In the words of an African news feature published in the journal *"Nature"* by Elisabe Brits on 20th October, 2021 stated *that "Young people in Africa are particularly at risk of mental disorders and healthcare systems are not well equipped to deal with them."*[2]

In the context of public health, mental health is characterized by emotional stability, positive behavioral modifications, low prevalence of anxiety and debilitating symptoms, and the ability to build healthy relationships and manage daily demands and stressors. It encompasses social, psychological, and emotional well-being and influences how individuals respond to interpersonal stress and make decisions. To address the challenges in mental health care, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched the *"WHO Special Initiative for Mental Health 2019-2023: Universal Health Coverage for Mental Health,"* aiming to provide 100 million more people in 12 major countries with access to high-quality and affordable mental health treatment.[3]

There are various forms of mental health disorders, including mood disorders, anxiety disorders, personality disorders, and psychotic disorders. These conditions impact individuals across all stages of life, from childhood and adolescence to adulthood, and affect both those directly impacted and the broader society. By raising awareness about mental

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[1] Barriers to Mental Health In Africa https://www.afro.who.int/news/barriers-mental-health-care-africa

[2] NATURE. **NEWS FEATURE** 20 October 2021. High mental health burden for Africa's youth. https://www.nature.com/articles/d44148-021-00097-y

[3] World Health Organization. (2019). The WHO special initiative for mental health (2019-2023): universal health coverage for mental health. World Health Organization. https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/310981. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO

health issues and reducing the stigma, society can create an inclusive environment where individuals feel supported and less pressured to hide their struggles. This is important in the context of the fact that WHO estimated that there are more than 116 million people were already estimated to be living with mental health conditions pre-COVID-19 pandemic.[4] For example, the prevalence of depression a particular mental health problem across African countries is estimated to be about 29.19 million people (9% of 322 million) suffer from depression, with over 7 million in Nigeria (3.9% of 322 million).[5]

WAIPH's Mental Health Programme Perspective?
WAIPH acknowledges that while severe mental illness requires attention, it is also crucial to focus on common mental illnesses and subthreshold conditions, particularly among those who are employed. Individuals with common mental illnesses often struggle without receiving therapy or support at work, making them vulnerable to job loss and permanent exclusion from the labor market. Therefore, mental health policies should shift from a reactive approach to a preventive one, emphasizing early interventions and support for employees to maintain their jobs and well-being.

Successful integration of mental health into primary health care has shown promising results. By leveraging cross-cutting structures and integrating mental health services into routine healthcare settings, individuals have better access to mental health care without facing additional barriers. This approach enables early detection, timely intervention, and effective management of mental health conditions, leading to improved overall health outcomes.

In West Africa, WAIPH has pushed for integrating mental health into primary health care settings because of the potential benefits. By training primary healthcare providers in mental health screening and basic interventions, communities have experienced increased access to mental health services. Through community engagement and awareness campaigns, the stigma surrounding mental health has reduced, leading to greater acceptance and support for individuals facing mental health challenges.

WAIPH advocates for a people-centered and socially dynamic approach to public health, where mental health is prioritized alongside physical health. By promoting mental health integration into primary health care, we can create a more resilient and inclusive society where individuals thrive, contribute to their communities, and lead fulfilling lives. It is our firm belief that mental health care should be accessible, affordable, and an integral part of the overall healthcare system, fostering a healthier and more prosperous West African region.

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[4] WHO. World Mental Health Day 2022. 10 October 2022, Message of WHO Regional Director for Africa, Dr Matshidiso Moeti https://www.afro.who.int/regional-director/speeches-messages/world-mental-health-day-2022#:~:text=Across%20the%20African%20Region%2C%20more,as%2013%20years%20of%20age. (Accessed 03/08/2023)
[5] Gbadamosi IT, Henneh IT, Aluko OM, Yawson EO, Fokoua AR, Koomson A, Torbi J, Olorunnado SE, Lewu FS, Yusha'u Y, Keji-Taofik ST, Biney RP, Tagoe TA. Depression in Sub-Saharan Africa. IBRO Neurosci Rep. 2022 Mar 17;12:309-322. doi: 10.1016/j.ibneur.2022.03.005. PMID: 35746974; PMCID: PMC9210463. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9210463/#:~:text=In%20Africa%2C%20about%2029.19%20million,3.9%25%20of%20322%20million).

WAIPH's Mental Health Strategies:
As the global community increasingly recognizes the importance of mental health in achieving sustainable development goals, the WAIPH emerges as a pioneering force in promoting mental health integration into primary health care. With a comprehensive mandate cutting across various critical domains such as enabling environment, HRH capacity development, research, public health functions, health systems strengthening, standards, and professionalization, WAIPH is at the forefront of creating people-centered and responsive healthcare systems in the West African region.[6]

WAIPH's commitment to mental health integration is manifested through its innovative initiatives like the Young Public Health Professionals (YPPH) programme and the Health Literacy Leadership Programme.[7] Through these cutting-edge capacity development programmes, WAIPH empowers a new generation of public health professionals with the skills and knowledge necessary to address the mental health challenges of the region. By enhancing the competencies of primary healthcare providers through the YPPH programme, WAIPH ensures that mental health screenings, interventions, and support are seamlessly integrated into routine healthcare services.

Furthermore, WAIPH plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between research and practice in mental health care. Through its rigorous research efforts, WAIPH generates evidence-based solutions that inform policy decisions and interventions in mental health integration. By advocating for standardized guidelines and best practices, WAIPH ensures that mental health is an integral part of health systems, and the quality of care is consistently improved across the region.

WAIPH's emphasis on professionalisation and health literacy leadership is a testament to its commitment to building a skilled and competent workforce that can effectively address mental health challenges. By equipping health professionals and community leaders with health literacy skills, the Institute empowers them to foster mental health awareness, reduce stigma, and promote early detection and intervention.

As an organization deeply invested in health systems strengthening, WAIPH envisions a future where mental health is fully integrated into the fabric of primary health care. By creating an enabling environment that prioritizes mental health services, WAIPH strives to ensure that no individual is left without access to the care they need. Through cross-cutting structures and innovative approaches, WAIPH champions the cause of mental health integration, fostering a healthier and more resilient West African community.

In conclusion, the Institute exemplifies the pivotal role of mental health integration into primary health care as a crucial public health intervention. With a multifaceted mandate

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[6] HNN. WAIPH Profile https://www.healthynewbornnetwork.org/partner/west-african-academy-public-health-waaph/
[7] Vanguard News. Medical division improves operation with 296 emerging health worker. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/07/medical-division-improves-operation-with-296-emerging-health-workers/#:~:text=The%20YPPH%20programme%2C%20an%20award,of%20the%20Africa%20We%20Want .

encompassing enabling environment, health workforce capacity development, research, public health functions, health systems strengthening, standards, and professionalization, WAIPH's efforts are becoming notable as instrumental in creating people-centered and responsive healthcare systems in the West African region. As the world grapples with mental health challenges, WAIPH's dedication and innovative approach provide a ray of hope for a healthier and happier future for all in the spirit of leaving no-one behind and universal health coverage.

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