

INTERNATIONAL PROJECT ACCELERATES PROGRESS TO STRENGTHEN MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEMS

One month before world attention on World Mental Health Month, leaders of global mental health EMERALD programme convene in Cape Town, and advocate for the scale-up of mental health services in low and middle-income countries.

2 September, Cape Town, South Africa – Some of the world's leading experts on mental health policy, service planning and financing - from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and academic partners in Europe, Africa and Asia - will meet from 7-9 September at the University of Cape Town to report on the latest findings and progress of their multinational six-country research project, the Emerald project.

The Emerald project (Emerging Mental Health Systems in Low- and Middle-Income Countries) is a global mental health research partnership aimed at improving mental health systems and capacity-building in South Africa and five other low and middle-income countries. It is generating **new evidence on the cost of scaling up evidence-based mental health services** in this country, Ethiopia, India, Nepal, Nigeria and Uganda. The aim is to advance sustainable development goals in support of the post 2015 development agenda of the United Nations and WHO's Global Mental Health Action Plan through research and advocacy: for the establishment of adequate, fair and sustainable resourcing; integrating the provision of physical and mental health services; and improving the coverage of care.

All around the world, people with mental illness have limited access to treatment, and in many countries, less than 10% of them receive any effective treatment. In many low- and middle-income countries, there are insufficient resources to offer adequate care. People living with depression, alcohol use disorders, epilepsy, schizophrenia and other mental illnesses are often left to the care of their families, causing severe social disadvantage. Further, the widespread occurrence of largely untreated mental disorder has raised concerns about the potential adverse economic impact to countries, both at an overall macroeconomic level as well as possibly more concentrated effects in different economic strata, according to

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a 2007 study by Shekhar Saxena and colleagues. There are particularly urgent concerns about the socio-economic effects of mental illness, through the impact of mental disorder on poverty, according to the findings of a study by Crick Lund and colleagues.

“Emerald is undertaking groundbreaking research that will assist governments to strengthen health systems by investing in mental health care. The purpose of our meeting is to meet with policy makers from Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda and share our research findings, to enable the use of our research in policy and practice,” says Professor Graham Thornicroft, leader of the Emerald project from King's College, London.

South Africa has made great progress in developing policies that aim to scale up mental health services in the country, most recently through the launch of the National Mental Health Policy and Strategic Framework (2013-2020).

“We have had a recent breakthrough in the mental health policy environment in South Africa, through the adoption of our new national Mental Health Policy Framework,” says Professor Crick Lund, an Emerald Co-Investigator from the University of Cape Town. The real challenge, he believes, is to implement this policy and strengthen mental health care for the poorest and most vulnerable populations. Emerald is generating research evidence that can help to address these challenges, he adds.

Dr Dan Chisholm, an Emerald Co-Investigator from the WHO in Geneva says: “In trying to move towards more complete coverage for needy and vulnerable populations, decision-makers need to weigh up a number of different health financing options or strategies, in particular how to increase access at a cost that is affordable, not only to the South African economy as a whole but also to the households or individuals who make use of services that are available.”

These discussions are particularly relevant as South Africa moves towards a National Health Insurance system. According to Prof Inge Petersen, an Emerald Co-Investigator from the University of KwaZulu-Natal: “it is vital that mental health is included in the core package of services funded by the NHI”. In South Africa, severe depression and anxiety disorders are associated with a significant reduction in earnings for both employed and unemployed adults living with these conditions whereby the estimated lost income is \$4,798 per adult per year. Given the volume of adults affected in the country, the total annual cost amounts to \$3.6 billion- a

contrast to the estimated \$59 million annual government spending on mental health services. **These findings illustrate that mental illness has a major economic impact primarily through the effects of disability and stigma on productivity.**

“Many of these challenges are common across Africa, and are found in Nigeria too,” according to Emerald Co-Investigator from the University of Ibadan, Prof Oye Gureje. As we approach the month of October, marked globally as mental health awareness month, the work of the Emerald project has become increasingly relevant, both in South Africa and internationally. During this pivotal meeting, marking the project’s mid-way milestone, a policy-maker symposium will be held (7 September), providing a forum for project collaborators and international policy makers to discuss the emerging findings from Emerald. The forum will discuss the planning of mental health scale-up, economic impact of mental disorders, the health system barriers to mental health care scale-up and potential strategies to overcome them, service user involvement in mental health systems and approaches to capacity-building for mental health systems. Dr. Melvyn Freeman (Cluster manager: Non-communicable diseases at National Department of Health) and Dr. Tracey Naledi (Chief Director: Health Programmes at Western Cape Department of Health) will join policy-makers from Ethiopia, Nigeria and Uganda to inform the future directions of Emerald and to share experiences of engaging in scaling up mental health care.

Highlighting the importance of building capacity for mental health research and leadership in Africa and Asia, the Emerald project is proud to be joined by Professor Norman Sartorius, a former Director of the Division of Mental Health and Substance Abuse at the World Health Organization, who will facilitate a two day leadership course for early-career researchers working in the field of mental health (5th and 6th September). This internationally recognized program will seek to support participants in establishing their role in the future of global mental health in these regions.

The event is being hosted by the Alan J. Flisher Centre for Public Mental Health in the Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health at the University of Cape Town. Leaders in national and international mental health programmes, from the World Health Organization; King’s College, London; and experts from Ethiopia, Germany, India, Nepal, The Netherlands, Nigeria, South Africa, Spain and Uganda will be attending this important milestone meeting.

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