

Kalmunai: A model on Mental Health Services Delivery



Community Support Officers in one of the trainings in Kalmunai.

With the support of international donors such as the governments of Finland and Ireland and the NGO World Vision Australia, WHO Mental Health team is supporting the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition on the development of community-based mental health activities in Sri Lanka. An example of the activities' good results can be seen in Kalmunai district.

Kalmunai, 16 June 2008.- Lakshmi's mother is a patient at the Mental Health Acute Ward of the Kalmunai Base Hospital, located in the Eastern district of Ampara in Sri Lanka, one of the areas of the country that was more severely devastated by the 2004 tsunami. She is still not feeling completely well, but she is better since she is receiving the assistance of the mental health team at the hospital. "We are very happy because we see our mum improving and my younger sister and I have the possibility to stay in the hospital 24 hours and consult the nurses any time we need" Lakshmi said. Families of the patients staying in this ward are provided with board and lodging as well.

According to one of the three Psychiatrist Social Workers in Kalmunai district, Hameen, "we consider really important that patients maintain their family links while staying in the acute ward, so we provide them with the possibility to stay in the hospital any time their relatives need to be here". Patients stay generally no more than two weeks in the Acute Ward of the hospital, during the most difficult stages of their mental illness.

Thanks to the support of the World Health Organization (WHO) Sri Lanka, the Kalmunai Base Hospital set up one of the most complete mental health services in the country. Apart from the mental health services at the hospital, there are outreach clinics to reach patient in remote areas of the district, as well as the provision of follow up mental health care through a group composed of 43 Mental Health Community Support Officers (CSOs) spread across the district. They regularly visit patients who have been already discharged from the acute ward but are still in need of regular check ups.

During one of the visits of the two CSOs in charge of following up Mohan, one of the patients discharged from the Acute Ward in Kalmunai Based Hospital has made very positive progress. "I feel much better now, I could even go back to my job as a tailor and I am getting married very soon" Mohan said. He added "I am taking my drugs regularly

and the CSOs help me in case I need any kind of assistance”. The 43 CSOs working across Kalmunai district have been trained by a team of experts on mental health issues and on the referral of cases to specialists in the hospital. Also, they work very closely with communities on the identification and referral of possible new cases of people in need of mental health assistance.

According to Hameen “this community-based approach is having excellent results and we hope to continue it in the following months”. He added that “we are extending our services to support those patients who do not need to stay in the acute ward because they feel better but have no home to go to, or do not have a family member to support them”. In July, a new rehabilitation centre in Kalmunai district will be open where about 20 former patients of the Acute Ward with no home will be able to stay for a maximum of 6 months while acquiring working skills through vocational training. The idea is to prepare them for their reintegration into society as self-reliant people.

It is estimated that about three per cent of the population of Sri Lanka suffer from some kind of serious mental health illness. Poverty, high consumption of alcohol, the traumatic effects of the 2004 tsunami and high occurrence of violence in the country (Sri Lanka is involved in a three decades long civil war) are often causes associated with the high number of people affected by mental illness in this island. As a result, Sri Lanka has one of the highest suicide rates in the world. In spite of this situation, mental health services are very limited and unequally scattered across the country. Most of the services are concentrated in three big mental hospitals in the surroundings of the capital, Colombo. However, in other areas of the country, especially in remote rural areas, mental health services are very limited or do not exist at all.

Thanks to the support of the Governments of Finland and Ireland and the NGO World Vision Australia, WHO Sri Lanka is supporting the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition on the development of mental health services in seven tsunami affected districts of the country (Galle, Hambantota, Jaffna, Kalmunai, Kalutara, Matara and Batticaloa) that once developed the Ministry eventually will meet the full running costs. About 11 districts in the Central, Northern and Eastern provinces have no mental health services available. According to WHO Representative in Sri Lanka, Dr. Agostino Borra, “WHO desperately needs the support of international donors to be able to provide mental health services in these areas”. He added that “the success of mental health services in areas such as the Kalmunai district proves that, with international support, new services could be successfully developed in other needy districts of the country”.

A survey of 152 low to middle income countries showed that only three countries in the world - Sri Lanka, Chile and Brazil- have shown success through mental health interventions at a national level. Dr Borra concludes saying “WHO Sri Lanka’s aim is continuing with this trend, establishing models of mental health services to be followed by other middle and low income countries”.

(The real names of the patients interviewed have been changed to respect their privacy)