South Africa

Mental health is fundamental to the achievement of a healthy nation. Evidence has also shown that poor mental health is not just an individual or personal issue but one that both shapes development and is shaped by social and economic forces. A milestone for mental health in South Africa was the transformation of health systems in South Africa (1997) and subsequently through the Mental Health Care Act No. 17 of 2002. This Act is human rights orientated and promotes community-based care over institutional treatment where possible. It also emphasizes integration of mental health with general health care services.

It is disturbing though that despite this legislation which is regarded as one of the most progressive mental health legislations in the world, persons with mental disorders are often still stigmatized and discriminated against. The Department has taken a number of steps to implement the key provisions of the Act, but we acknowledge that many challenges are still being encountered. Among these is limited access to mental health services, slow progress in integrating mental health into general health care and continued overreliance on custodial care. Moreover even though we know now that most upstream determinants of mental health and ill-health lie beyond the reach of the health sector and require inter-sectoral collaboration, this collaboration still requires strengthening.

In April 2012 the Department Health convened a Summit on mental health to bring all major role-players together to assess the current situation and to agree on future directions. The Summit represented a significant milestone for mental health as it provided the platform for government to interact with stakeholders and objectively review both the quality and quantity of mental health services that we currently provide. Identify the key challenges in the mental health care system, provide information on and share best practices that have emerged since 1994 and agree on key interventions that must be prioritized and implemented as we reorganize and strengthen the health system. The conclusion of the summit and the declaration, The Ekurhuleni Declaration on Mental Health- April 2012, agreed by participants (and published in this edition of the Journal) will, I am sure, assist us as a country in improving our mental health delivery system.

Various papers that were presented at the summit by researchers, academics, mental health care users and clinicians and experts in infrastructure development, covering a wide range of topics in mental health, are included in this special edition of the Journal. It is my belief that this wealth of knowledge and the declaration will not only benefit South Africa but other countries in and outside Africa in moving to more equitable and just mental health services and promotion of good mental health.

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References


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