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SEMINAR ON POSTGRADUATE TRAINING NEEDS IN SOCIAL PSYCHIATRY

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REDUCING MENTAL DISORDERS AND SUICIDE

By the year 2000, there should be a sustained and continuing reduction in the prevalence of mental disorders, an improvement in the quality of life of all people with such disorders, and a reversal of the rising trends in suicide and attempted suicide.

ABSTRACT

This report reviews the mental health care needs in Armenia and their implications for the postgraduate training of mental health workers and primary health care personnel and the development of community-based multidisciplinary teamwork. Within the postgraduate training programmes special attention is also given to the care and rehabilitation of people with severe and chronic mental illness and disability.

Keywords

PREVENTIVE PSYCHIATRY
PSYCHOLOGY, SOCIAL
EDUCATION, MEDICAL, CONTINUING
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Introduction

At the request of the Ministry of Health of Armenia, and in collaboration with the Canadian-Armenian Medical Relief Committee of Ontario, the World Health Organization Regional office for Europe organized a seminar on the postgraduate training needs in social psychiatry in Armenia from 6 to 8 August 1994 in Yerevan. The seminar was attended by 28 Armenian experts, selected by the Ministry of Health, a temporary adviser from the Netherlands, a representative from the Canadian-Armenian Medical Relief Committee of Ontario, Canada, and one WHO/EURO staff member. The aim of the seminar was to review the mental health sector's needs in the fields of social psychiatry and community mental health care in Armenia, and to put forward proposals for improving the training of mental health workers in these domains.

The seminar was opened by the Minister of Health, Dr A. Babloyan, who stressed the importance of mental health within the new Armenian Health Policy, and the need to promote understanding of the changes to be made. Dr Babloyan emphasized the relevance international collaboration in this respect and thanked the WHO European Office and the Canadian-Armenian Medical Relief Committee of Ontario for the support given to this initiative.

Summary of discussions

During the first part of the seminar, Armenian experts described the mental health situation and the mental health services and its practice in Armenia. This included a detailed description of the present under- and post-graduate training programmes in psychiatry and clinical psychology. This was followed by contributions from the participants about the role of primary health care services in the delivery of mental health care, about hospital and community care for the severely mentally ill and the chronically mentally disabled, and about the roles of the various mental health professionals in the multidisciplinary team.

The second part of the seminar was dedicated to group work on ways of improving post-graduate training of mental health professionals in the above three domains.

Finally, the conclusions and recommendations of the three working groups were presented for approval by the plenary meeting. The following set of proposals were agreed upon.

Conclusions

1. The mental health care sector in Armenia is under severe pressure for change and improvement, as a consequence of several factors: a) the new health and social policy implemented since the independence in 1991 of the country; and b) the growing need for mental health care, especially of vulnerable groups in the population that are more exposed to socioeconomic deterioration as a result of the blockade, and to the psychological traumas of dislocation and armed conflict.

2. In order to adjust to the new demands as quickly as possible, the possibilities and constraints of the existing mental health care system should be carefully assessed and monitored.
3. Three major requirements for the development of the mental health care system are the following:
 - Integration of a mental health care component in primary care.
 - Rehabilitation and community-oriented care for the longterm mentally ill and mentally disabled.
 - Changes in the orientation and training of mental health professionals towards outreaching multidisciplinary teamwork, involving psychiatrists, nurses, clinical psychologists, social workers and primary care workers.
4. Formulation of new mental health legislation should include standards of care in line with the above requirements.
5. Due to the recent, rather drastic socioeconomic changes and resulting hardship, the health professionals are working in relative isolation, with very limited contact with the international scientific community. The participants of the seminar considered it a timely and useful opportunity to take stock of their situation, and an important step in resuming international collaboration in the field of mental health.

Recommendations

1. Mental Health Care in Primary Care

Mental health care should form an essential component in the delivery of primary care, especially in the present stressful situation which is also affecting the life of the health worker. Therefore, it is recommended that brief postgraduate training courses be developed for general practitioners, pediatricians, neurologists and nurses working in primary care, as well as for ambulance workers, enabling them to diagnose and manage common mental health problems: psychosocial problems, anxiety, depression, suicidal and aggressive behaviour, somatization and neurotic reactions. The course should include interviewing techniques, dealing with tension in the patient-doctor relationship, and the utilization of diagnostic and management protocols. Such protocols and a manual for trainers need to be developed; for example, regarding the proper use of psychotropic drugs in primary care. Experience gained with the training should lead to integration of its elements in the undergraduate training programme of all health professionals.

The Ministry of Health is recommended to initiate the development of a manual for trainers and a demonstration training course.

2. Care and rehabilitation of people with severe and chronic mental illness and mental disability.

A new postgraduate training programme in psychiatry has been developed and is being implemented. The training in general psychiatry has been increased to two years, and that in child psychiatry, psychotherapy and forensic psychiatry to three years. Courses in psychiatry of three months have been launched for general practitioners.

Postgraduate training in the care and psychosocial rehabilitation of severely and chronically mentally ill and mentally disabled patients is considered an urgent requirement. In line with this, the delivery of care by the psychiatric dispensary needs to be reorganized. Particularly longterm care and support of the chronically mentally ill and disabled will depend on:

- improving the physical care and living conditions of patients;
- modernizing diagnostic and laboratory facilities;
- organizing domiciliary visits and home care;
- establishing or improving vocational workshops; and
- development of residential alternatives for longterm inpatients without a social network.

It is expected that as a result of such measures the length of stay in hospital of mentally ill patients will be reduced.

In order to achieve these objectives, it is recommended that the postgraduate training of mental health professionals includes specific courses on the care and psychosocial rehabilitation of patients with chronic mental illness or disability. Effort should be made to familiarize medical students with the key concepts of mental impairment and disability and their management.

Furthermore, it is recommended to initiate a demonstration project in the care and psychosocial rehabilitation of the chronically mentally ill and disabled in a carefully selected institute. This project could serve as a testing and training ground for programmes in psychosocial rehabilitation. Support for its development could be obtained through twinning with wellknown and experienced institutions abroad.

3. The mental health team - roles of the various professions

One of the unfortunate consequences of the dire socioeconomic conditions prevailing in Armenia is an increase in the demand for psychosocial support. At present the psychiatric services of the country are not only stretched to their limits, but they are also considered inadequate as to the type of assistance provided to the majority of the psychologically affected. Such people are in need of mental health assistance wherein a multidisciplinary team of properly trained mental health professionals collaborates in providing the necessary services to treat or alleviate problems.

Therefore, it is recommended to create an interdisciplinary team of (mental) health professionals (physicians, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, nurses and social workers) for the purpose of initiating a mental health centre, wherein the focus will be on professional development and training. Attention should be paid not only to specific courses on psychopathology, psychodiagnostics and methods of intervention, but also to the supervision of training, to the delineation of professional boundaries, to developing and maintaining interdisciplinary relations and collaboration, and to the formulation of professional ethical codes and guidelines for the delivery of mental health care.

It is also recommended that such a mental health centre should regularly hold seminars, conferences and case discussions to promote mental health research.

4. Mental health information

A consequence of the breaking up of the centralized structure of the USSR is reduced access to technical and scientific information (books, journals, manuals, audiovisual material) which could facilitate the training of mental health professionals. Added to this is the difficulty of publishing and disseminating scientific information and the results of research on mental health within the country.

Therefore, WHO/EURO is recommended to establish a mental health information centre in Yerevan to collect documentation and information on mental health and to support the distribution of this material throughout the country. It should also support seminars, consultations and educational programmes (television).

Furthermore, WHO/EURO is recommended to promote participation of Armenian mental health experts in international mental health activities, particularly in the areas considered a priority with regard to postgraduate training.

Finally, WHO/EURO is recommended to support Armenia in its efforts to frame new mental health legislation, covering also the civil rights of the mentally ill and the rules regarding involuntary treatment.