



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

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GLARING INEQUALITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL DISORDERS ADDRESSED IN NEW WHO EFFORT

Global experts and stakeholders in mental health, law and human rights collaborate in a landmark publication

Geneva - Today the World Health Organization (WHO) is giving countries an important new legal tool to help address the often unacceptable conditions in which people with mental disabilities live.

There are more than 450 million people with mental, neurological or behavioural problems throughout the world. In many countries, they are among the most vulnerable and the least legally protected. Nearly a quarter of all countries have no mental health legislation, while many more have legislation that poorly protects the human rights of people with mental disorders, or does not reflect currently accepted mental health practices.

For example, in some communities, people with mental disorders are tied or chained to trees or logs. Others are incarcerated in prisons without having been accused of a crime. In many psychiatric institutions and hospitals, patients face gross violations of their rights. People are restrained with metal shackles, confined in caged beds, deprived of clothing, decent bedding, clean water or proper toilet facilities and are subject to abuse.

In addition, people with mental disorders often face social isolation and severe stigmatization which results in additional human rights violations, including discrimination in education, employment and housing. Some countries even prohibit people from voting, marrying or having children.

WHO is providing support to an increasing number of countries implementing progressive mental health laws that respect, protect and fulfil the rights of people with mental disorders, with the aim of improving their lives and well-being.

As part of this ongoing effort, today WHO announces the publication of a landmark book which will guide countries and support stakeholders in creating mental health legislation. The *WHO Resource Book on Mental Health, Human Rights and Legislation* includes input from consultations with hundreds of experts and stakeholders throughout the world, leaders in psychiatry, psychology, law, and human rights, as well as representatives from mental health service users, family groups and NGOs.

"We have a moral and legal obligation to modernize mental health legislation. WHO is ready to help its Member States fulfil this obligation with technical support and expert advice." said Dr. LEE Jong-wook, Director-General of the World Health Organization.

The book examines international human rights standards and shows how they apply to people with mental disorders, addresses the 'why' and the 'how-to' of drafting, adopting and implementation, as well as linking legislation with mental health policy. The book also includes a 'step-by-step' checklist for reviewing existing legislation and developing new laws.

The *Resource Book* illustrates how a human rights approach to mental health law improves the quality of psychiatric care and improves access. In Chile, for example, recent measures to protect and promote the rights of people with mental illness have resulted in investigation of abuses, changed therapeutic practices, and improved access to treatment and rehabilitation.

WHO has also established an international network of experts in mental health, law, and human rights trained in the WHO framework for mental health legislation. Currently, WHO and network members are offering technical advice and assistance to several countries throughout the world. The network stands ready to assist any country that wishes to modernize its mental health laws.

Dr Soumitra Pathare, a psychiatrist from Pune, India is a contributor to the *Resource Book*. She notes that "legislation can be an invaluable resource in promoting the human rights of people with mental disorders throughout the world. Respect for rights and provision of quality mental health services go hand in hand -- you cannot have one without the other. The WHO approach is flexible enough to be of use in countries with vastly different historical, social and economic contexts."

The information contained in this *Resource Book*, together with the technical expertise provided by the WHO and its network of experts are important steps in moving towards universal human rights protection and access to care for people with mental disorders.

Mental health issues will be the focus for WHO on Human Rights Day on 10 December 2005.

To access The WHO Resource Book on Mental Health, Human Rights and Legislation, please see:
http://www.who.int/mental_health/policy/en/.

For further information on mental health: http://www.who.int/mental_health/en/ or <http://www.who.int/nmh>

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