

## Editorial

# No mental health without primary care

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The World Health Organization *World Health Report 2008: primary health care – now more than ever*, focused on the core values of primary care.<sup>1</sup> It emphasised the need for the renewal of primary care as, although the people of the world are healthier, wealthier and living longer than 30 years ago, these positive trends have been deeply unequal, with some countries lagging behind or, in some instances, even losing ground. The report noted that a health system that focuses too narrowly on specialised services often results in fragmented health care.

Mental health service users are more affected by the fragmentation of services because, as a result of co-morbidity, they have worse physical and mental health outcomes. In the majority of low- and middle-, and in some high-income countries, primary care mental health developments have been sporadic and inconsistent and have often lagged behind the overall strengthening of health and primary care services.

It is timely that the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Organization of Family Doctors (Wonca) have jointly produced a report *Integrating Mental Health into Primary Care: a global perspective*.<sup>2</sup> The report presents the reasons why mental health needs to be integrated into primary care and also presents practical recommendations and solutions as to how integration can be achieved.

Some of the key messages of this report include:

- mental disorders affect hundreds of millions of people and, if left untreated, create an enormous toll of suffering, disability and economic loss
- despite the potential to successfully treat mental disorders, only a small minority of those in need receive even the most basic treatment
- integrating mental health services into primary care is the most viable way of closing the treatment gap and ensuring that people get the mental health care they need

- primary care for mental health is affordable, and investments can bring important benefits
- certain skills and competencies are required to effectively assess, diagnose, treat, support and refer people with mental disorders; it is essential that primary care workers are adequately prepared and supported in their mental health work. We need education and training on mental health care for all students and health professionals training to work in family medicine and other areas of primary health care
- there is no single best practice model that can be followed by all countries. Rather, successes have been achieved through sensible local application of broad principles
- integration is most successful when mental health is incorporated into health policy and legislative frameworks and supported by senior leadership, adequate resources, and ongoing governance
- to be fully effective and efficient, primary care for mental health must be co-ordinated with a network of services at different levels of care and complemented by broader health system development
- numerous low- and middle-income countries have successfully made the transition to integrated primary care for mental health
- mental health is essential for achieving person-centred and holistic primary care
- mental health is central to the values and principles of the Alma Ata Declaration; holistic care will never be achieved until mental health is integrated into primary care.

It is the right time for health policy makers, planners and primary care practitioners to work collaboratively towards the common goal of integrating well-functioning primary care and mental health services so that holistic patient-centred care and mental health promotion can be delivered to the population as a whole.

Mental health continues to be an important aspect of health worldwide, as approximately 14% of the global burden of disease can be attributed to neuropsychiatric conditions. It is now recognised that there can be no health without mental health. For this to be achieved it is necessary to identify a global tool to make mental health accessible to all. The current evidence suggests that primary care is that tool.

Stigma continues to be a major obstacle to accessing mental health care.<sup>3</sup> It affects patient access to mental health care and may be one of the factors contributing to the increased mortality and morbidity among people suffering from mental illness when compared to the general population.<sup>4-7</sup>

Developing a good primary care service that integrates mental health provides the opportunity for improved access to affordable, cost-effective mental health interventions and a reduction in stigma. This allows positive mental health to be a more realistic goal for all so that every one of us can achieve 'A state of well being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities and can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her own community'.<sup>2,8</sup>

In a health economy there is no health, without mental health. Equally, to achieve mental health for all a health economy requires functional integrated primary care services.

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