

MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVES IN SINGAPORE

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As Singapore enters into its next phase of economic and social development, this progress comes with a price. The stresses and strains that accompany our constant striving for improvement and advancement make enormous demands on our mental and psychological well being.

Mental health, long neglected by our society and the medical community, has now come to the forefront in recent years as we begin to acknowledge the plight of many sufferers of mental ill health. As much as 16.6% of our Singapore population were found to have some form of mental ill health at some time in their lives. Many do not seek help for these problems, as the stigma associated with mental illness remain strong to this day. Some 3% of our population suffer from schizophrenia and psychotic disorders, with 75% of such patients presenting before the age of 25 years.

The World Health Organisation's global focus on mental health is highlighted with the World Mental Health Day this October 2010. The WHO Mental Health Initiative is described by Prof Goh Lee Gan in this issue.

It is timely too, to bring to the forefront the attention of our readers to the efforts in Singapore to advance the cause of mental health. Such efforts include the Early Psychosis Intervention Programme [EPIP] which was launched in 2001, and more recently the research initiative LYRIKS (Longitudinal Youth-at-Risk Study), which seeks to identify the risk factors for the development of psychosis, engage and increase public awareness of psychosis and the at risk mental state [ARMS]. The importance of engaging primary care and allied health professionals, as well as the general public is well covered by Dr Jimmy Lee's article. With such initiatives in place, it is our hope and desire that mental health in Singapore

society can be improved across the board.

Primary Care and Family Physicians have from time immemorial been the backbone of the medical services in Singapore. For a time, society had tended to look towards subspecialisation and hospital-based medicine as being de rigeur. Over the recent years, health authorities throughout our global village have realised the importance played by primary care physicians, and are beginning to engage them further in the management of cases traditionally thought to be under the "specialists" purview. Singapore's Mental Health Blueprint and Policy recognises the important role GPs can play in the provision of care to patients with mental illness. Dr Alvin Lum's description of a GP integrated mental health care programme highlights how enlightened individuals can drive such integrated programmes in the community. Such engagement with GPs, together with adequate training equips and empowers the GP to manage cases in partnership with his specialist colleagues. We look forward to more such programmes in other specialities!

Addiction is another issue we are faced with on a daily basis. Whether it be to psychoactive drugs, nicotine or behaviour problems like pathological gambling, there are very real problems for which we have to find solutions. Prof Wong Kim Eng's article illustrates well the problems pathological gamblers face, and showcased the different services and treatment modalities available at the National Addiction Management Service.

There is therefore an urgent need to equip ourselves with the skills and tools to manage these hitherto neglected mental health issues. Prof Goh's description of our Mental Health Curriculum illustrates the current state and future challenges our medical educators face in training our young doctors.

In our endeavour to prevent mental ill health and reduce the mental illness disease burden, it is our hope that this issue will be able to bring back our focus on mental health, highlighting how we in the primary care community can make a positive contribution towards better mental health in Singapore in the 21st century.

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