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An analysis of mental health specialization among Zimbabwean health professionals, against the backdrop of a soaring global mental health burden

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Background: An estimated 1.3 million Zimbabweans suffer from various forms of mental illness. The problem is compounded by an extremely low number of practicing mental health professionals despite the availability of an array mental training health programs.

Aim: The aim of the study was to explore non-mental health professionals' perceptions on specialization, especially concerning the field of mental health.

Methods: The study was qualitative in nature. 12 participants from each of the professions of social workers, occupational therapists, nurses and doctors were recruited for the study using purposive sampling. The subjects were from Parirenyatwa Hospital and St. Giles Rehabilitation Centre in Harare, Zimbabwe. The instrument was a 7 question semi-structured interview administered either face to face or via telephone calls. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: A total of 3 themes emerged and these related to the factors considered when choosing a profession or specialty, factors that discourage health professionals from specializing in mental health and the views of non-mental health staff towards mental health professionals. Aspects of a high job market, high income, prestige, passion to save lives, family traditions and inspirational role models were important for career choices. Conversely, stigmatization, experiences during training, mental illness treatment approaches, cultural beliefs, the fear of the mentally ill and a lack of community support all discouraged specialization. Some of the non-mental health staff envisaged mental health staff as having fewer opportunities for career development.

Conclusion: Zimbabwean health professionals generally have negative perceptions towards mental health specialization. Public education to destigmatize mental illness, establishing community mental health structures, enhancing security at mental health institutions and revising the curricula of mental health training are some of the strategies to encourage more professionals in mental health.

Biography

Seda Maeresera holds a Master's degree in Public Health from the University of Roehampton, London, UK, as well as a Bachelor's degree in Occupational Therapy from the University of Zimbabwe. He is currently working in the traumatic brain injury units at Sultan Bin Abdulaziz Hospital in Saudi Arabia.

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