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Mental Health – A Grave Challenge

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“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

World Health Organization 1948

World Health Day is celebrated globally on 7th April every year since 1950 under the aegis of UN World Health Organization (WHO). This day provides the international community with an opportunity to ponder over the key public health issues confronting the humanity and take measures for improving the health outcomes especially for the poor and marginalized segments of the society. The theme of 2017 World Health Day campaign is: “Depression” as a complement to the one year campaign initiated as from 10th October 2016 on the eve of the World Mental Health Day. The major aim is to help people suffering with depression solicit and access assistance and counseling to deal with this burgeoning problem.

Depression is a mental illness characterized by persistent sadness and loss of enthusiasm, accompanied by fatigue, change in appetite and sleeping pattern, anxiety, hopelessness and thoughts of self-harm or suicide. The propensity and risk of getting and be in the state of "depression" is fomented, inter alia, by poverty and deprivation, sad and sordid life events, and, physical illness and drug usage. It affects people of all ages from all walks of life and is the second leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds in the world. As per latest estimates from WHO, more than 300 million people in the world are now living with depression which shows an increase of 18% from 2005 to 2015. In the case of Pakistan, the incidence of depression and mental disorder is also on the hike; around 50 million people are suffering from this affliction the bulk of which is the adult population. This includes about 20 million children who are in dire need of attention by the mental health practitioners. This is alarming as the number of those suffering from depression and mental illness in Pakistan is much higher than the global average of 20%.

The Global Burden of Disease Study, that assesses the United Nations’ health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has ranked Pakistan at 149 out of

188 countries. This ranking is based on factors like access to family planning, infant mortality at birth and children under the age of five etc. The situation is further aggravated on account of widespread prevalence of Hepatitis B, childhood malnutrition and stunting, violence and drug consumption. The conditions of women is even worse in the country, as there are no proper maternal health facilities available.

Mental Health Policy is an essential and powerful instrument to promote mental health and well being of a society especially in the wake of environment of increasing stress, tension and sense of insecurity engulfing the country. Pakistan's mental health policy was last revised in 2003 while the disaster/emergency preparedness plan for mental health revised in 2006. Earlier, the mental health legislation of 2001 focused on: the access of the people to mental health care; rights of mental health service patients, family members and other care givers; competency, capacity, and guardianship issues for people with mental illness; voluntary and involuntary treatment; accreditation of professionals and facilities; and, law enforcement and other judicial system issues for people with mental illness. The law also provided the mechanisms to oversee involuntary admission and treatment practices besides implementation mental health legislation.

In terms of institutional arrangements while a national mental health authority exists which provides advice to the government on mental health policies and legislation, its functional efficacy and ability to plan, manage, co-ordination and monitor mental health services continues to remain weak.

The 11th Five Year Plan 2013-18 embodies an Action Plan for mental health which envisages establishment of a mental health coordination unit and a technical advisory committee with representation from all provinces and federal areas as also from NGOs, disaster prone areas, media etc., to implement, monitor and evaluate the Plan. The Plan also provides for: the review of existing mental health law and enhancement of the rights of persons with mental disorders; capacity strengthening of medical staff at the first level care facilities and community psychiatric nurses and other allied mental health workers (at least two MOs and three psychiatric nurses per 100,000 persons per year to be

trained); and special emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention with respect to mental health.

As stated above Pakistan has a colossal problem associated with mental health which has been frequently brought to the fore for government's attention. However, lack of a clear mental health policy, low manpower and budgetary resources, absence of robust assessment of population needs, and above all low political will and commitment for developing mental health services especially in rural areas, the magnitude of the problem and its adverse implication for sustainable human development continue to pose a major challenge. It is thus imperative to formulate a coherent health policy through consultative and inclusive process with technical assistance from agencies like WHO to address the mental health problem in all its complexities and to contextualize it in the local social, economic, cultural and physical environment of Pakistan. The following guidelines could facilitate the formulation and/or updating the mental health policy:

- pursuit of a consultative, participatory, inclusive and socially cohesive approach and process to benefit from all perspectives for mental health policy formulation;
- establishment of a robust and segregated data based on different strata and segment of the population reflective of their specific needs ;
- analytical work for developing effective strategies by reviewing the local and international medi-care and mental health research and scientific work and at the same time relating it to the local situation;
- benefit from global best practices and the successful creative experiences from all over the world especially from developing and middle income countries;
- setting of clear policy principles and objectives geared improving the mental health of population and mitigating the causative stressful factors;
- developing cross- sectoral linkages and synergies like: financing, legislation and human rights to comprehensively address the complexities of mental ill health;
- ensuring adequate resource allocation including targeting financial assistance to the poor and indigent;

- delineation of the roles and responsibilities of different sectors like: governmental agencies; NGOs; academia and professional bodies; private sector to avoid coordination dysfunction and institutional fragmentation;
- capacity development both of policy makers as well as service delivery officials to provide responsive, cost effective and efficient mental health service delivery;
- investment in research and development by incentivizing the teaching hospitals both in the private and public sector; and finally
- learning from Bhutan experience to promote happy and harmonious life in terms of specifically designing and working on "happiness index" as one of the measures of sustainable human development

It is a pity that Pakistan ranks 181 out of 185 countries according to the World Bank report on health spending as the country spent only 2.61% of its GDP on health. This speaks of the pathetically poor performance of the government and the low priority being attached to this extremely important sector. The Federal Budget 2016-17 earmarked Rs. 22.4 billion to the Health Sector compared to Rs. 11 billion in the previous fiscal year which shows significant improvement. However, how much of this amount is spent to improve the health indicators for the poor is yet to be seen. Much rests with the provincial government especially after the 18th constitutional amendment which transferred health sector service delivery to the provinces but the federal government should continue to support the mental health related programs and monitors the performance of the provincial governments on this account.