Addressing mental health in Maldives
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6th September 2022
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543,620 (2021)
Population

79 (2020)
Life-expectancy in years

16,520 (2021)
Gross national income per capita, Atlas method (current US$)

8.04% (2019)
Health expenditure as a % of GDP

69 (2019)
UHC service coverage index

The burden of mental health problems

- The WHO Global School-Based Student Health Survey (GSHS) in the Maldives (2014) found that of the 1,875 students aged 13 to 17 year, who participated in the survey, 14.1% had seriously considered attempting suicide during the 12 months before the survey, 12.7% had attempted suicide one or more times during the same period.

- Child sexual abuse is an emerging concern for Maldives, and the impact of such abuse on the mental health of victims is yet to be comprehensively examined.

Since there are no recent data on the prevalence of mental disorders, and because primary health centres currently do not collect data on mental health services, it is difficult to estimate the treatment gap. It can be speculated that Maldives may have a high treatment gap like many other countries in the Region.
Mental health policies, programmes and laws

- The government is working on strengthening the policy environment for mental health at present.

- The current mental health policy, was developed in 2015 for 10 years - until 2025. It provides a blueprint to include mental health services at the primary health care (PHC) level while also strengthening the secondary and tertiary level of mental health care. However, implementation of this policy is facing challenges including the lack of human resources and the Covid-19 pandemic.

- The previous mental health strategic plan was from 2016-2021. Now the new strategic plan is under development. This plan will be from 2022 to 2026.

- The Central and Regional Mental Health Plan to roll out mental health services in various regions was endorsed on 17 March 2022, and its implementation has been initiated.

- There is no standalone mental health law at present. A Mental Health law is being drafted now through consultation with stakeholders. It is expected to comprehensively cover services. A high-level committee to oversee its implementation is also planned.
Prevention and promotion activities: organization and coverage

• Maldives has been chosen as one of the pilot countries in the Region to implement the joint WHO-UNICEF project on Mental Health and Psychosocial Services (MHPSS) to children and adolescents. This project will hopefully address the growing children and adolescent mental health issues in the country.

• The mental health programme is currently working with UNICEF to formulate a communication strategy to launch a national mental health campaign, with a focus on promoting the positive mental health and resilience and improving the coping capacities of individuals and broader community. It also will sensitize the population to reduce stigma and address negative social norms.
Mental health services: organization and coverage

Health workers per 100,000 population

- **Physicians**
  - 170.8 (2018)

- **Nurses and midwives**
  - 642.8 (2018)

- **Community health workers**
  - 180 (2010)

- The Health Protection Agency under the Ministry of Health is responsible for implementation of public health programmes in the country including the mental health programme. Health services including mental health services provided at the atoll and regional level are overseen by the Regional and Atoll Health Services. Government hospitals in the Greater Male’ area operate under an independent board and not through the Ministry of Health. A national mental health advisory board and a national mental programme already exist.

- The Mental Health Policy and Strategic Plan includes integration of mental health at PHCs through training of health workers in PHCs. Each of the PHC is manned by a doctor, a nurse and community public health workers. Some of them are already trained on mhGAP intervention in PHC, while others will continue to be trained to be able to provide basic mental health care.

- The Centre for Mental Health was established in 2019 in Malé, is the central referral point and centre of excellence for mental health treatment, providing psychological support services, counselling, and medication. As of 2021, it was the only centre in the country providing specialist mental health services with four...
psychiatrists, three psychologists and two psychotherapists, two social workers, three counsellors and one occupational therapist. In addition, some of the regional hospitals also now have psychiatrist posted and working there.

- A long-stay rehabilitation centre called the “Home for People with Special Needs” (HPSN) exists in the country. It has more than 250 beds for chronically ill, elderly people with no family support and those who are severely disabled. It is planned to focus more on people with severe mental health conditions in the future. A short-term mental health rehabilitation facility to provide clinical services and community integration is planned. HPSN has a mix of elderly people with no family support and mental health patients. The home does not provide any rehabilitation services.

- Human resources for mental health is very limited at present. Priority should be given to systematically address this issue through the development of mental health professionals. There are degree programmes in psychology, counselling and nursing, which can be strengthened to include mental health management as a subject. A mechanism should be established to provide supervision for the students who completes the counselling and psychology program to ensure the accreditation approval to work as an allied health professional, the absence of which is a barrier for them to work in the county. WHO can support the country in training specialist mental health professionals and in implementing mhGAP training of general health workers.

- A Faculty of Medicine has been newly established. mhGAP training can be incorporated into its curriculum.

- This year, 17 people were trained as master trainers of mhGAP by an international team. These trainers will conduct trainings for doctors, nurses and public health workers in the regions which would be the first step towards rolling out of the regional mental health plan.

- Earlier the government supply system had difficulty in delivering psychotropic drugs to the PHC due to logistical constraints. However, the supply chain of psychotropic drugs improved after the government established a pharmacy in every island. The government-owned State Trading Organization (STO) is a public company that procures, supplies and distributes medicines, equipment and consumables for the public sector, with funds from the government. In 2014, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed between Ministry of Health and STO to open pharmacies in all inhabited islands.

- The capacity for forecasting drug requirements is limited at the moment due to lack of trained health personal to prescribe psychotropic drugs and other logistic constraints such as an absence of a stock management system.

### Mental health workers per 100,000 population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental Health Workers</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatrists</td>
<td>3.2 (total 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health nurses</td>
<td>0.0 (total 0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologists</td>
<td>1.32 (total 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social workers</td>
<td>0.38 (total 2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Multi-sectoral involvement

- The National Drug Agency (NDA) under the Ministry of Health provides national drug treatment and rehabilitation services through different centres throughout the country. These facilities provide treatment services and psychological support for people with drug use disorders. Community based services and reintegration services are very limited.

- Several nongovernmental organization (NGOs) provide mental health, substance use and neurological support services. These include Society for Health Education (SHE), Care Society, Maldives Autism Association, Beautiful Eyes - Down Syndrome Association, Journey, Open Hand, Aged Care Maldives, Society for Women Against Drugs (SWAD), Hand in Hand and Health Awareness Foundation (MHAF). Maldivian Red Crescent (MRC) and its predecessors have also been very active in the training and provision of psychosocial support.

- All the NGOs and private sector mental health service providers are involved in a mental health network that was established during the pandemic in 2020. This network is need-based and works towards mental health awareness and strengthening of services.

- However, almost all these NGOs and private services providers are based in the Greater Male’ region and their services do not reach out much to the atolls and islands.

A network of all NGOs and private sector entities providing mental health services was established in 2020.

Mental health information system and research

- There is no formal system of collecting and reporting mental health data. The capacity for research needs prioritizing strengthening. The Mental Health Programme is currently working with the Health Information System section to integrate mental health information into the District Health Information Software 2 (DHIS2).

- A major constraint for research the limited availability of data. The planned national level mental health survey is expected to generate important data to review and improve the mental health care services in the country.
Analysis

Issues requiring urgent attention

- A comprehensive study on the prevalence and burden of mental health issues in Maldives has not been conducted since 2003. Therefore, there is not much evidence on the specific mental health issues requiring urgent attention in the country.
- Substance use is a significant problem in the country that needs priority.
- Suicide is emerging as a major mental health issue in addition to the observed increase in anxiety, depression, psychosis and epilepsy in the general population.

Current efforts that need to be sustained and supported and areas requiring more investment

- The secondary and tertiary mental health services need to be strengthened in terms of human resources, better financing and governance structures so that they can provide comprehensive services through multi-disciplinary mental health teams.
- The government is currently planning to revitalize primary health care services through dedicated PHC teams within different levels of health centres. A mental health professional will be a part of this team.

Main challenges

- Stigma, discrimination and lack of awareness of mental health at all levels of the society and the lack of human resources remain major challenges. Even where mental health services are available, people are reluctant to seek treatment due to belief in supernatural causes and due to shame and stigma.
- The lack of data on mental health is another challenge that need addressing. The last mental health survey was conducted in 2003.
### SWOT

#### Strengths

- A comprehensive mental health policy is available.
- There is a dedicated Mental Health Programme at the Ministry of Health.
- High priority is being given to mental health by the government at present.
- A systematic drug procurement and distribution system is in place.
- The approved Central and Regional Mental Health Services Plan is available.

#### Opportunities

- A new mental health law is in the final stages of drafting.
- The Mental Health Strategy 2022–2026 is being drafted.
- There is a recently established faculty of medicine and the availability of degrees on nursing and psychology.
- A network of all NGOs and private sector entities providing mental health services has been established.
- The government is providing high priority to strengthen primary care through dedicated primary health teams at different levels of the health system.
Weaknesses

- There are no recent data on the prevalence of mental disorders.
- Programmes for prevention and promotion are lacking.
- There is a need for strengthening primary and secondary care with technically competent human resources.
- The limited capacity to forecast drug requirements needs addressing.
- A data collection system on mental health within the health system needs to be established.

Threats

- Stigma and discrimination are widespread.
- Illegal drug use estimated to be increasing.
- There is a high rate of suicidal ideation among young people.
Notes