

Samoa's mental health sector in need of attention

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The mental health status in Samoa is very low, this is according to Acting Head of Mental Health Unit in Samoa Tuliloaina Dr Ian Parkin.

"At the moment we only have three nurses working specifically in the field of Mental Health. There is only one psychiatrist specialising in helping those with mental problems," he said.

It is this limitation in skills and numbers of professional people dealing directly with patients with mental health risks as well as a lack of resources available in not only Samoa but many other Pacific Island countries this has been the initiative for the World Health Organization to set up the Pacific Islands Mental Health Network (PIMHnet).

It is an organisation which provides the mechanism for Pacific countries to work together on a range of initiatives to improve mental health in the region.

Their vision is that the people of Pacific Island countries enjoy the highest standards of mental health and well being through the access to effective, appropriate and quality mental health services and care.

This vision hopes to be achieved by PIMHnet facilitating and supporting cooperative and coordinated activities within and among member countries that contribute to sustainable national and sub-regional capacity in relation to National Health.

Representatives from 16 different island countries are meeting in Apia to discuss and share ideas and joint activities and work together as Pacific Island countries to raise profiles and

positions of mental health units throughout the Pacific. This was according Frances Hughes a temporary adviser at the meeting.

She also says that this meeting is an excellent opportunity for Pacific Islands to share not identical but similar problems that they are encountering in relation to mental health.

"By doing this they are able to share human resources available in their countries as well as to get funding from donors such as NZAid. They can also establish policies to help with the development of mental health in their countries."

Dr. Ian Parker told Newsline that what PIMHnet essentially has to offer is Advocacy, Policy, Legislation, Planning and Service Development, Human Resources and Training, Research and information and access to Psychotropic Medicines to help in the development of mental health in Pacific Island countries.

He adds that WHO has assisted Samoa through consultation in the development of their policy and legislation.

Mental Health is concerning a persons state of well being and those suffering from mental issues include people with stress, and depression. There is also mental disorders such as those suffering from serious stress and depression and down-syndrome. This also includes those with drug related problems.

PIMHnet has helped Pacific Island nations organise their services to better develop mental health care services available to the population.

He says that Samoa is fortunate to be one of the first Pacific Island nation to have already begun working on their policy.

He estimates that 20 per cent of Samoas population have some degree of mental problems and although most have minor problems and about 5 per cent suffer from serious problems. This is about 4000-5000 people in Samoa alone with significant mental health problems this is a large number when compared to the help and service available to them is very limited.

Reports have shown that there is an increasing number of mental health problems this is also evident in the suicide rates.

Dr Michelle Funk Coordinator of Mental Health Policy and Service Development World Health Organisation, Geneva says fact is Samoa, and other Pacific Island countries are not well equipped to deal with these problems it is therefore an excellent idea to bring them together to share ideas, resources and solutions.

This is also a good opportunity to address ways to tackle some disabling obstacles that are hindering the development of mental health.

Mental Health generally ranks low on public health in the Pacific, where it is forced to compete for scarce resources and public recognition. Consequently services often are extremely limited, underfunded and poorly distributed and staffed.

As a result PIMHnet came into being.

Dr Funk says that Samoas Ministry of Health has been very supportive of their goals and they have witnessed bigger progress in developing mental health in Samoa.

The National University of Samoa has created a program for psychiatric nurses other Pacific Island countries are therefore benefiting and learning from the progress made in Samoa.

Dr Wang Xiangdong, the Regional Adviser for Mental Health says that there is an act that they are looking at implementing, this can become an important tool for providing treatment and care for people with mental health problems.

The Mental Health Unit is calling out to anyone with any Mental Health problems to contact.

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