

## **Samoa Observer**

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### **Moves to improve mental health care**

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Issues concerning the development of a Mental Health Policy for Samoa were explored at a workshop this week.

Spearheaded by the Mental Health Unit and the Planning and Policy division of the Ministry of Health, the agenda included a review of a draft Mental Health Bill. This is currently being written by the Office of the Attorney General.

Participants represented a range of interest groups from the private and public sectors. They included mental health professionals, the Attorney-General's office, and nursing lecturers from the National University of Samoa.

The three-day workshop was sponsored by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations agency responsible for international health.

The WHO constitution defines health as "a state of physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Many organisations are now adding to this definition a fourth dimension of health - spiritual well being, a notion that meets with widespread acceptance among Samoans.

The WHO constitution states: "The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic and social condition."

### **PRIORITY**

In May 2001 the World Health Assembly in Geneva identified mental health as a global health priority.

In October 2001, the World Health Report was published with a focus on mental health. The five-year Global Action Programme was launched to help countries in closing the treatment gap.

Dr. Soumitra Pathare, a psychiatrist with vast experience in the field of mental health policy and legislation, has been contracted by WHO to assist with this process in Samoa.

Dr. Pathare, one of two principal writers of a resource book on Mental Health, Human Rights and Legislation, attended the workshop. He was impressed with the level of commitment and understanding shown by those closely involved with this initiative.

Improving mental health in Samoa is an extensive undertaking requiring cooperation among a range of groups. Recognising the importance of such cooperation was one of the recommendations from the National Symposium on Mental Health Issues in Samoa held 8-11 April 2003.

During the symposium, representatives from many government and non-government organisations met. They exchanged information, shared experiences, and consulted about mental health issues and the constraints facing mental health workers and those seeking mental health care and treatment.

## **VISION**

The 2003 symposium defined a vision and mission statement for Mental Health in Samoa. It made a number of important recommendations aimed at improving the situation facing this critical yet neglected component of health services.

**Vision:** For all Samoans to enjoy mental wellbeing through a multi-sectoral approach aimed at building a healthy and productive society.

**Mission:** Holistic, responsive and effective mental health services that is evidence-based, culturally sensitive, affordable and accessible to all Samoans.

The group at the workshop held earlier in the week re-examined these statements and agreed to a set of core values and principles to guide policy development:

### **Core values and principles:**

Mental wellbeing is grounded in the aiga and nu'u (community).

Respect of the rights of all people including the right to care.

Provision of appropriate care that is accessible to all people without discrimination.

Recognition that mental, physical, social and spiritual health are indivisible.

Quality mental health services.

Dr. Pathare assisted the group with reference to a WHO guidance instrument and legislation checklist. With his technical advice, the group agreed to recommend 11 key areas to be included in Samoa's mental health policy.

Tony Lawson, the Parliamentary Counsel under direction from the Attorney General, read sections of the draft Bill. This gave the group an opportunity to provide feedback and instructions concerning the design of the Bill and its implications for mental health and those providing services.

The Attorney General's Office appreciated the opportunity to consider the Bill in this early stage of the drafting process.

The meeting also recommended the establishment of a working group to draft a policy and plan based largely on the 2003 symposium recommendations and in collaboration with community stakeholders.

Following this, the Mental Health Policy will be submitted to the Minister of Health and Cabinet Development Committee for their consideration.

Frances Brebner, Assistant Chief Officer Health Planning and Policy Division, said: "We are excited with this development and are committed to improving mental health care and treatment in Samoa through this initiative which we believe has widespread support at the community level".