

World Health Day – 7 April 2001

**As burden of mental disorders looms large,
countries report lack of mental health
programmes**

The World Health Organization (WHO) said today that many of its Member States are ill-equipped and unprepared to cope with the predicted world-wide rise in mental and neurological disorders.

Seventy-eight countries (43%) have no mental health policy at all, 37 countries (23%) have no legislation on mental health, 69 countries (38%) have no community care facilities and in 73 countries - 41% - treatment of severe mental disorders is unavailable in primary health care.

The figures are based on information gathered from 181 countries by Project ATLAS, covering 98.7% of the world's population. The on-going project is collecting basic information on mental health resources from all of WHO's 191 Member States in order to construct global and regional databases, maps and profiles. WHO's regional offices are also collaborating in the project. WHO is working with its Member States to focus international and national attention on mental health. More than 400 million people alive today suffer from mental disorders or from psychosocial problems such as those related to alcohol and drug abuse.

"This information is a wake-up call for us and for the world. It paints a dismal picture of neglect and a severe lack of resources. The sooner we face up to this reality, the more prepared we will be to provide care and cure," said Dr. Benedetto Saraceno, Director, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, WHO.

Global surveys conducted by WHO show that mental and neurological disorders currently form 11% of the world wide disease burden. By 2020, this burden is expected to rise to 14.6%. Five mental disorders—unipolar depression, schizophrenia, alcohol use, bipolar and obsessive compulsive disorders—are among the diseases causing the highest disability ratings in the world. In the face of this increase, the readiness of countries and the resources issue is critical. The means to treat many of these disorders exist, says the world's leading public health organization.

The ATLAS project also attempts to evaluate the availability of essential drugs to treat mental and neurological disorders at the primary care level, something the experts agree is crucial for providing effective care. More than 25% of the countries do not have the most commonly prescribed antipsychotic, antidepressant, and antiepileptic drugs considered essential for the treatment of common mental and neurological disorders at the primary health care level. While a national policy for essential drugs is present in most of the countries, many of these policies have been developed in the last five years, making it unlikely that the benefits of this policy have fully filtered down to the consumer level.

Other issues addressed by the project include: mental health financing; primary and community care; the availability of inpatient facilities, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals; monitoring and data collection systems; and programmes for special populations.

"Before the project, little was known about the resources available for mental health care within countries," said Dr Shekhar Saxena, coordinator of Project ATLAS. "Armed with this new wealth of information, we can now help countries prioritize their health care needs and target our assistance to the areas most needed," he added.

For 12 months beginning January 2001, WHO is focusing on mental health. The World Health Report (WHR) 2001, scheduled for release in October, will be on this issue as will a series of international and regional events.

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