

Mental Health in the Pacific: the role of the Pacific Island Mental Health Network

Frances Hughes

Correspondence

Dr Frances Hughes, RN, DNurs, ONZM, PIMHNet Facilitator, PO Box 58026, Whitby, Porirua 5245, New Zealand. Phone +64 4 234 7332, mobile +64 21 276 4977, fax +64 21 234 8689, email frances.hughes@clear.net.nz

Abstract

This article summarises the work being undertaken by the World Health Organisation Pacific Islands Mental Health Network (PIMHnet) since its inception in 2006. The article also outlines the mental health issues that present particular challenges in the Pacific region, and the innovative approaches that have been taken to address those issues, with the goal of improving mental health throughout the Pacific.

PIMHnet is co-ordinated by Dr Michelle Funk (Coordinator Mental Health Policy and Service Development Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse WHO); Dr Xiangdong Wang (Regional Mental Health Advisor, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific); Dr Frances Hughes (Facilitator, PIMHnet and Stephanie Calder (Senior Analyst, PIMHnet).

Introduction

This article is a summary of the work being undertaken by the WHO Pacific Islands Mental Health Network (PIMHnet) since its inception in 2006. The article also presents a strong argument for an increased focus on mental health issues in the Pacific, and greater involvement from countries that have a close relationship with developing Pacific nations.

Background

The Pacific is a fast-developing region, rich in cultures and history. While medicine in the Pacific region has developed considerably over recent years, there is a need to ensure that development keeps pace with emerging issues. This is particularly evident in the area of mental health, where services have not developed at the same pace as other health services in the Pacific. Mental health needs include not only disorders such as depression, psychosis and others but also drug and alcohol abuse. There is considerable evidence that the latter are increasing in the Pacific, and that suicide among young people is increasing.

Funding for health services (inclusive of mental health) is low among many Pacific Island countries,

with a strong emphasis on curative services. Health promotion initiatives tend to be poorly supported in terms of funding and expertise, and delivery of health services is hindered by a lack of reliable equipment, access to modern medicines and lack of trained health workers. These issues, and in particular the problems presented by migration of skilled workers from the Pacific, were the subject of a report to the WHO in November 2006.¹

Mental health needs in the Pacific

In January 2005, WHO undertook a situational analysis of mental health needs and resources in Pacific Island countries ('the Mental Health Needs report'), to examine mental health needs in the Pacific and the resources available to meet those needs.¹ Although the report noted the strong primary health basis in most Pacific countries, it also emphasised that this does not include the delivery of mental health services. Furthermore, the report found that primary health training and education for mental health is based on scarce resources and there is a need to invest more time and resources in building human resource capacity.

¹ Hughes F, Finlayson M, Firkin MP, Funk M, Drew N, Barrett T, Wang X, Fristch F. Situational Analysis of Mental Health Needs and Resources in Pacific Island Countries, Centre for Mental Health Research, Policy and Service Development, World Health Organisation, January 2005