Integration of mental health into primary care

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Abstract

As we all know, mental disorders affect hundreds of millions of people and, if left untreated, create an enormous toll of suffering, disability and economic loss. Despite the potential to successfully treat mental disorders, only a small minority of those in need receive even the most basic treatment. Mental health is central to the values and principles of the Alma Ata Declaration. So, it appears to be logical that integrating mental health services into primary care seems the most viable way of closing the treatment gap and ensuring that people get the mental health care they need. But how to do this? For sure it is essential that primary care workers are adequately prepared and supported in their mental health work. In fact, certain skills and competencies are required to effectively assess, diagnose, treat, support and refer people with mental disorders. For this purpose, we need education and training on mental health care for all students and health professionals training to work in family health and other areas of community oriented primary care. From an European point of view, there is no single best practice model that can be followed by all countries. Rather, successes have been achieved through sensible local application of broad principles. Again, how? Well, it is a fact that integration is most successful when mental health is incorporated into health policy and legislative frameworks and supported by senior leadership, adequate resources, and ongoing governance. Numerous low- and middle-income countries are successfully making the transition to integrated primary care for mental health, such as United Kingdom, Netherlands, Sweden, France, Ireland, Estonia and Portugal. Others, like Italy, Belgium, Poland, Romania and Spain are still making their development mainly on secondary mental health care institutions. In this presentation we will do both the update and the broad perspective of the current situation of the integration of mental health into primary care in the different countries across Europe, with a deeper explanation of the state of the art in Portugal.