Closing mental-illness gap in Vietnam

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A Simon Fraser University researcher is going to Vietnam to study how to address the shortage of accessible and adequate services for people with mental disorders like depression and anxiety.

"This lack of services means that many people go untreated and suffer unnecessarily. Research has shown that providing mental-health services in primary care can work, but there are a lot of factors that have to be understood in order to plan the best possible interventions," says Jill Murphy, a PhD candidate with SFU Health Sciences.

"My research looks at health workers in primary care as the first point of contact that people make when they are seeking help for their illness. Understanding the challenges and opportunities to integrating mental-health services in primary care from the point of view of health workers can help us to plan interventions that are tailored to the needs of the people delivering the services."

Mental health has generally been given less attention and funding than other health issues, even in countries like Canada, despite the fact that studies show mental illness will affect one in five Canadians.

One reason is that a lot of stigma surrounds mental illness. In a global context, health priorities in low- and middle-income countries in the past 15 years are largely driven by the United Nations' millennium development goals.

These goals focus on crucial health issues like maternal and child health,

and infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS, but unfortunately mental health is not reflected in these goals. Murphy says it's been left out of health policy and funding agendas and should be made a priority.

The Vancouver resident is in the process of applying for an overseas work permit and hopes to leave for Hanoi this spring.

"I'm interested in issues such as how health workers understand common mental disorders themselves, the extent to which health workers stigmatize people with mental illness, how the high demands of their work might make them resistant to introducing new skills and practice, and how health policy might influence the everyday work of health workers," Murphy says.

"While this project is specific to Vietnam, the framework used to study the issue will be applicable to other countries that are trying to improve the availability of mental health services in primary care."

Murphy's research will complement a Grand Challenges Canada project led by SFU Health Sciences professor Elliot Goldner and Dr. Vu Cong Nguyen with the Institute of Population, Health and Development in Hanoi. The pilot study looks at the feasibility of implementing a large-scale trial to introduce training for primary care workers in Vietnam to provide services for common mental disorders.

Provided by Simon Fraser University

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