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Just Imagine: Why are some people more equal than others?

Just imagine that you or one of your loved ones develops a psychiatric illness. There is a one in four chance that any of us in our adulthood will develop a psychiatric disorder. Now imagine that you do not have access to simple cheap medication or treatment. Even if you do, there is a strong likelihood that people will avoid you and your family. Now imagine that you are on medication and treatment, and you get better. You apply for a job and the application for the job asks you about your medical history. You fill the form truthfully, and are not shortlisted. You manage to find a job well below your achievements; you perform successfully but your colleagues still avoid you and your family. Imagine that you continue to improve and get better, and are well settled – yet you are likely to die 15-20 years younger than your peers who do not have a mental illness. With your mental illness, if you go to a hospital for treatment of a physical illness, chances are very high that you will not be investigated thoroughly. Now imagine – is this fair?

In many countries around the world, patients with mental illness are likely to be shackled, end up in prison or wander the streets in a state of homelessness. In many parts of the world, an individual with mental illness cannot vote, inherit property or adopt children. Why is this seen as fair?

Individuals with mental illness have the same rights as individuals without mental illness. These rights exist in theory, but not in practice.

Stigma against people with mental illness is linked to lack of knowledge, which affects attitudes and behaviour. The World Psychiatric Association (WPA) – a global body with 137 member societies from 119 countries, representing 200,000 psychiatrists world-wide – has been working towards reducing stigma against individuals with mental illness. However, as the French philosopher Roland Barthes highlighted, stigma is related to the creation of ‘the other’, which validates our own identity. The provision of education about mental illness can only go so far in changing attitudes and behaviour, even when the levels of education change. This is where the provision of dealing with discrimina-

tion comes in. Discrimination against individuals can be eliminated using legal structures. Gender rights, children’s rights and LGBT rights have often been won by legal changes and using legal provision. It is thus critical that we work towards understanding and eliminating discrimination through legal means.

The equity of resources, be they financial or personal, is the first step. There is no reason why individuals with mental illness should be ignored, abused and devalued. When the global burden of disease attributed to neuropsychiatric disorders is higher when compared with cardiovascular disease or cancer, why should mental health services lag behind in funding? When one in four individuals is likely to develop a psychiatric disorder in their adulthood – meaning that every family in the land will be affected directly or indirectly – why is that due attention is not paid to the welfare of individuals with mental illness? Social justice demands that adequate and equitable resources be made available for mental health services, as well as research into psychiatric disorders.

The stereotype that all individuals with mental illness are violent needs to be challenged. The range of psychiatric disorders varies from problems in childhood, common mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, phobias; substance abuse and addiction disorders; psychoses; psychosexual disorders; dementia etc. It is imperative that all nations of the world look at the legal provisions and amend laws accordingly.

WPA has embarked on such a project, ascertaining types and varieties of discrimination across member nations, and we expect to launch a full report on the 2nd World Mind Matters Day (4th September 2016).

Fast forward 20 years and now imagine a world where, if you develop a mental illness, you will be looked after in a non-discriminatory way with well-resourced services, well-trained personnel and evidence based interventions. We all must aspire to such a scenario. □

—*Professor Dinesh Bhugra, CBE,
President of the World Psychiatric Association*