

The Mental Health Leadership and Advocacy Programme

University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Background: Even though mental health problems are common and impose considerable suffering on affected persons and their families and constitute a major burden on societies, they do not receive adequate policy attention in many parts of the world. Low- and middle-income countries, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, are particularly remiss in giving adequate attention to mental health issues. This official neglect is reflected in the absence of or lack of implementation of mental health policies, outdated mental health legislation, inadequate funding of service and low human resources to meet the needs of persons with mental health conditions.

There is a common understanding that advocacy is required to get governments and policy makers to increase their attention to mental health service development. Such advocacy requires leadership across a broad spectrum of stakeholder groups. Persons advocating for mental health also need to be well informed about the issues that require attention and some knowledge about how those issues may be addressed. The goal of improving policy attention to mental health is therefore one that cannot be pursued without a well-informed group of advocates.

Aims: The Mental Health Leadership and Advocacy Programme (mhLAP) was launched at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria in 2010 with the goal of seeking to improve mental health service in the five Anglophone countries of Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Specifically, mhLAP seeks to 1) build skills and knowledge in mental health leadership and advocacy; 2) establish advocacy groups in the countries to champion the drive for improved mental health service; 3) conduct public enlightenment and other activities that seek to reduce stigma of mental disorders and of those affected by the disorders; and 4) conduct demonstration projects that highlight how improved service can be achieved within the available resources in the countries.

Achievements: Between 2010 and 2019, over 270 participants attended the annual 2-week leadership workshop at the University of Ibadan. Participants came from Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. They included mental health nurses, psychiatrists, social workers, service users, lawyers, policy makers, legislators and executives of non-governmental organizations. Mental Health Stakeholders Councils were established in Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone and some of the Councils have been registered to become NGO's devoted to mental health advocacy and service improvement in their countries. In each of the countries, the groups have been active in the development of new national mental health policies and legislation. Some of the trainees from the other countries have also gone back home to establish such NGO's. Demonstration projects on integrating mental health service into primary care were conducted in Gambia, Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone. In each of these countries, train-the-trainer workshops were conducted in which between 20 and 40

senior nurses were trained by psychiatrists in the use of the WHO Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP) intervention guide to deliver mental health care at primary care level. The trainees were encouraged to cascade the training to other colleagues in their countries with support from the local governments, even though this latter only happened in two of the countries. Also, using the WHO Quality Rights Tool, a demonstration project was conducted in which the staff of one major psychiatric hospital in Gambia, Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone were trained to improve the services provided to patients as well as improve staff awareness and observance of human rights in the provision of care. The reports of these projects are being prepared for publication in academic journals.

Future plans: The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the flow of mhLAP activities in 2020 and 2021. Nevertheless, going forward the plan is to continue with the pursuit of the main program goals of mhLAP. Funding for much of the work of mhLAP for the first ten years came from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade through CBM Australia. Further funding from other sources will be sought to support the advocacy and capacity building activities. Many of the trainees of the training workshop have asked for the opportunity to pursue a postgraduate degree in global mental health. The 2-week training workshop has modules that will constitute the core of such a degree program. A plan is therefore ongoing to develop a Masters degree in global mental health at the University of Ibadan to complement the short 2-week workshop.

<https://www.acu.ac.uk/the-acu-review/closing-the-gap/>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3931322/>

Professor Oye Gureje is Director of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Research and Training in Mental Health, Neuroscience and Substance Abuse at the [University of Ibadan](#), Nigeria.