

HIV infection and mental wellness

The HIV epidemic in South Africa has changed the face of medicine and psychiatry. The care of HIV-positive people should not be restricted to their physical health. More and more research is being done on the emotional, psychiatric and neurological manifestations of HIV.

The South African Society of Psychiatrists (SASOP) would like to emphasise the relationship between HIV and mental health. Both the public and people treating HIV infection should be aware of the mental manifestations of HIV infection. These range from minor intellectual difficulties (e.g. forgetfulness, poor concentration) to serious memory problems and sudden onset of psychiatric symptoms such as psychosis and mania. To ensure mental wellbeing of patients, the need for antiretroviral medication is all the more urgent.

People who have both serious mental disorders and HIV infection need additional support, especially when they are taking antiretroviral medication. The support should be both emotional and help them to take their antiretrovirals in the prescribed manner.

Those caring for the HIV-positive also have mental health problems. According to a South African Depression and Anxiety Support Group (SADAG) survey 89% of home-based care workers were themselves suffering from depression. As a result of this research finding, SADAG has been working for three years on a major AIDS and depression initiative, which includes workshops in rural areas on managing depression.

Psychosocial support to HIV-infected individuals and their families is critically important. Many people with serious mental illnesses are tested for HIV, but their capacity to provide informed consent to testing may be compromised. An ethical approach to HIV testing in these people is imperative.

An unfortunate number of children in our society are HIV-positive. HIV-positive children may suffer from anxiety and mood disorders as well as disruptive behavioural disorders. In addition, the children may fear losing their parents and home, rejection by peers, exploitation, their own failing health or early death. Caregivers dealing with these children should be well educated and sensitive to the needs of the children.

Psychological issues should be addressed in HIV prevention and educational programmes, because they are so important and they affect outcome for the HIV-positive individual as well as family members.

The full position statement is available on the SASOP website.

Source: www.sasop.co.za

Building awareness – reducing risk: Mental illness and suicide

The theme for the 2006 World Mental Health Day campaign, 'Building awareness – reducing risk: Mental illness and suicide', focuses attention on a major public health problem. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that there are one million suicide deaths each year, representing 1.4% of the total global burden of disease – and more people die by suicide each year than are killed by homicide, wars and terrorist attacks combined.

The 2006 World Mental Health Day campaign will provide an in-depth look at the role that mental illnesses play in suicide, and is intended as a powerful strategy to counter the commonly held perception that mental illnesses are a secondary health concern that can be delayed until more immediate and pressing health care concerns have been addressed.

Tackling the problem of suicide among the mentally ill requires both health care-based and public health initiatives. Health care schemes must strive towards prompt diagnosis of those with mental illnesses, adequate treatment (including careful monitoring of pharmacological treatments and increased access to proven psychotherapeutic interventions) and comprehensive rehabilitation programmes. In addition, there is an urgent need to improve the safety of many psychiatric facilities. Public health approaches need to emphasise that mental illness is treatable and that suicide is preventable. Efforts to monitor and reduce suicide rates should be among national and community concerns.

Furthermore two critical, and related, issues to which mental health organisations need to give special attention are the effect of stigma and misunderstanding that continue to serve as barriers for early recognition and treatment of mental illnesses, and the importance of responsible media coverage of mental illness and suicide.

The World Federation Mental Health has entered into collaboration with the International Association for Suicide Prevention to jointly promote World Suicide Prevention Day (10 September) and World Mental Health Day (10 October). This collaboration will add to the impact and benefit of both of these days, and will increase the value that each has in improving public awareness, reducing stigma and discrimination, and promoting service and policy advocacy to address the global impact that suicide associated with mental illnesses has on the global burden of disease.

Source: www.wfmh.org