

THE INAUGURAL SOUTH AFRICAN MENTAL HEALTH CONFERENCE

JOIN THE MOVEMENT

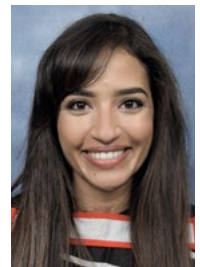
Tejil Morar

On the 24th and 25th of April 2023, the inaugural South African Mental Health Conference (SAMHC) took place at Emperors Palace, Johannesburg, South Africa (SA). The conference was hosted by the National Department of Health, in line with the 2030 National Development Plan, and the Foundation for Professional Development. *Join the Movement* was an apt theme, as it implied an intention of cohesion while advancing the field of mental health in SA. Attendees included the Deputy President Paul Mashatile, Dr Joe Phaahla (Minister of Health), the Director General Dr Sandile Buthelezi, multiple Members of the Executive Council (MECs), Heads of Department of Health and Professor Solomon Rataemane from the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Mental Health in SA.

The conference began with an opening address by Professor Olive Shisana, the conference chair. The address emphasised a “whole of society” approach, imploring various sectors to collaborate in relieving the country’s burden of mental illness. Challenges such as infrastructure difficulties, stigma, poorly integrated health systems, inconsistent standards of mental health care, inaccessible care and a limited range of treatment options were highlighted.

Opportunities for change presented included increased funding for mental health, an increase in human resources for mental health, primary prevention, reduced stigma, coordinated responses, community engagement and information systems to assess effectiveness of services and implemented policies.

The opening session also included powerful renditions of lived experiences of mental illness. Christine Nxumalo (a bereaved Life Esidimeni family committee member) lamented the lack of change in the SA healthcare system following the Life Esidimeni tragedy. She spoke of how mental health services in SA are still largely inaccessible for the majority of the population and that SA’s mental health policies are not the problem, rather the lack of implementation thereof.



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CHARLENE SUNKEL FROM THE GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH PEER NETWORK STRESSED THAT POLICIES SHOULD RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE AND PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS, MAKING IT ESSENTIAL TO CONSULT SERVICE USERS.

Professor Rita Thom spoke of optimising the health work force to improved mental healthcare, based on the Provider core competencies for improved Mental health care of the nation report (an ASSAf Consensus Study). SA has 1.07/100 000 psychiatrists/capita in the private sector and 0.33/100 000 in the state sector. With these shortages, solutions such as task-sharing; integration of mental health into primary health care; mental health competency in generalist health care workers and specialists shifting to more of an advisory role were proposed.

Dr Joe Phaahla concluded the opening session by presenting some sobering statistics on the number of public sector psychiatrists in the country: 50 in the Western Cape, 72 in Gauteng, 3 in the Eastern Cape and 4 in Mpumalanga.

HE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT SA PROVIDES FERTILE GROUND FOR THE CAUSATION AND EXACERBATION OF MENTAL ILLNESS AND REVEALED THAT AN INTERDEPARTMENTAL COMMITTEE (INCLUDING THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH ETC.) HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED TO FIGHT MENTAL ILLNESS.

The remainder of the day's programme included parallel presentations in various tracks:

- Track 1: Clinical, psychology and behavioural sciences
- Track 2: Technology and innovation
- Track 3: Policy and public health
- Track 4: Best practices and programmes
- Track 5: Communications and community engagement

The second and final day of the conference began with a plenary session chaired by Bharti Patel (SA Federation for Mental Health). The session included talks by Katy Katopodis, Professor Lesley Robertson, Dr Devora Kestel and Dr Antoinette Miric.

Katy Katopodis brought to our attention to the "news cyclone" in SA affecting the mental health of journalists and how it was the media's responsibility to provide fair and accurate news reflecting society.

THE POWER OF THE MEDIA IN THE FIGHT AGAINST MENTAL ILLNESS LIES IN OVERCOMING STIGMA, SHARING LIVED EXPERIENCES, EDUCATING THE PUBLIC AND CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES.

Professor Lesley Robertson spoke of mental health in context: globally (transnational crime, climate change), in community (safety and security, green spaces, school, work, health and social services), within families (home, nutrition, parenting and social support) and in the individual (healthy lifestyles etc.). Her talk featured striking media images of inhumane mental health services in SA, including poor infrastructure and lengthy queues.

A pre-recorded presentation by Dr Devora Kestel (WHO director of mental health and substance use) was a valuable addition to the programme. It centered around the World Mental Health Report

2022 which aims to transform mental health for all. Dr Antoinette Miric (co-founder of the Healthcare Workers Care Network) ended the session by recommending that the mental health of healthcare workers be prioritised. This can be done by an improvement in working conditions (safety, hygiene, water, electricity), proactive leadership, expressing gratitude to healthcare workers, providing easy access to confidential counselors and employee assistance programs, empowering team leaders, decreasing stigma and improved access to mental healthcare.

The day continued once again with parallel sessions from 5 tracks.

The final plenary session of the conference incorporated a presentation by world-renowned Professor Dan Stein (conference co-chair) on the 10 game changers in SA mental health including: funding by provinces for the National Mental Health Policy Framework 2023-2030, a focus on overlooked and vulnerable populations, integration of mental health into other non-communicable diseases (increased taxation of substances etc.), provision of independence for authorities like the Mental Health Review Board, upskilling of health professionals in mental health, increased training and research in mental health and parity of mental health resourcing.

Deputy President Paul Mashatile closed the conference by echoing the WHO 3 pillared approach to mental health: 1. Giving greater value to mental health 2. A need to promote mental health and reduce mental illness by intersectoral collaboration 3. Continuous improvement of mental services – public and private.

THERE WAS GREAT CONCERN AROUND THE RISE IN MENTAL HEALTH CASES IN SA, WITH ONLY 27% RECEIVING TREATMENT. THE CONFERENCE WAS FRAMED AS AN IMPORTANT START TO A DIALOGUE WHICH WILL OFFER GUIDANCE ON HOW TO IMPLEMENT POLICY.

Overall, the SAMHC was a wonderful initiative focused on mental health in SA. During the course of the conference, it was clear that many are aware of the challenges we face in mental healthcare and the urgency with which solutions need to be implemented. What remains to be seen is what improvements in SA mental healthcare will materialise within the next two years, before the subsequent conference. This will be the true litmus test of whether the SAMHC was a success or not.

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