

Global shortage of health workers in mental health: WHO

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In low-income countries, the rate of mental health workers can be as low as 2 per 1,00,000 population, compared with more than 70 in high-income countries. This is in stark contrast with needs, given that 1 in every 10 person is estimated to need mental health care at any one time.



There is a global shortage of health worker strained in mental health and a lack of investment in community-based mental health facilities even though some countries have made progress in policy-making and planning for it, according to the WHO's Mental Health Atlas 2017.

The report also highlighted that few countries have suicide prevention strategies despite WHO estimating that a little under 8,00,000 people die by suicide each year. Despite a slight increase in the number of countries reporting having a national suicide prevention strategy since the Mental Health Atlas 2014, only a third of upper-middle and high-income countries reported having such a strategy, with just 10 per cent of low- and lower-middle income countries with a strategy, the WHO said in a statement.

The revelations are based on data provided by 177 WHO member states, representing 97 per cent of the world's population, and measure the extent to which countries are strengthening leadership and governance for mental health and providing comprehensive mental health and social care.

It also took into account the strategies that were implemented to promote mental health and prevent problems, and strengthen evidence and research as outlined in WHO's Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020.

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Less than half of the 139 countries that have instituted mental health policies and plans, have these aligned with human rights conventions which stress the importance of transition from psychiatric institution to community-based services and the

participation of people with mental disorders in decisions concerning them.

And all too often, when mental health plans are made, they are not supported by adequate human and financial resources.

The global rate of beds in mental hospitals was reported to be six times more (11.3 per 1,00,000 population) than the rate of beds in the psychiatric wards of general hospitals.

According to the WHO report, levels of public expenditure on mental health are very low in low- and middle-income countries.

"Government expenditure on mental health is less than 1 US Dollar per capita in low and lower middle income countries whereas high-income countries spend more than USD 80. The majority of spending is going to mental hospitals, which serve a small proportion of those who need care," the WHO said.

"Nobody should be missing out on mental health care because of the cost. That is why WHO's push towards universal health coverage is so important: to ensure that everyone, everywhere, can access the care they need, including mental health care," Dr Shekhar Saxena, Director of WHO's Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse.

This latest edition of the Mental Health Atlas provides us with yet more evidence that scale-up of resources for mental health is not happening quickly enough, he added.