

Africa-Western Collaborations Day 2020: Health Systems and Health Management

The health systems and health management panel at Africa-Western Collaborations Day mentioned multiple important and recurrent themes in global health. A major theme that was discussed was mental health. Gojjam Limenih's presentation focused on addressing the mental healthcare gap between high-income countries (HICs) and low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs), as 90% of global mental health resources are in HICs, while 80% of the world's population lives in LMICs. It is therefore not surprising that 90% of people in LMICs do not receive treatment. Gojjam Limenih stressed the importance of implementing culturally sensitive and locally feasible mental health systems. For instance, "Western type" mental healthcare is not always suitable in non-Western settings. As depression is estimated to be the second biggest disease burden across the globe, it is vital to implement appropriate mental healthcare that is specific to the needs of the target population. This mental healthcare needs to take into account that depression does not have an exact equivalent in non-Western cultures, and so Western mental healthcare, which relies on diagnoses and medications, may not be suitable in these contexts. It is critical to analyze the social, political, and economic processes linked to depression or suffering in LMICs in order to construct an appropriate mental health system.

A subtle theme that was interwoven through the presentations was the translation of knowledge, particularly the dissemination of information, as it is a barrier to disease prevention and effective treatment. Jean Pierre Ndayisenga highlighted these difficulties when working to enhance the practical competency and knowledge application of nurses. A student approach is required; however, to improve professional development, Amy Olson identified knowledge sharing as essential in empowering nurses. Knowledge translation between cultures was also considered an area of improvement identified by the presenters. Many tools created for diagnosis, prevention, and treatment have been created with a mindset inspired by the Global North. Unfortunately, this impedes our desire and ability to translate knowledge productively. Joel Zhang identified the importance of co-producing knowledge in order to respect locals and the cultural beliefs held by the community. Simply put, cultural practices significantly influence a community's receptiveness and adherence to health information. Culture also influences the way we understand health. Gojjam Limenih identified this issue in respect to the ways we treat mental health in Africa. Since our diagnostic manual for psychiatrics was developed by the Global North and was exported to LMICs, she questioned the utility and validity of the psychiatric evaluation within specific cultural contexts. These presentations urge us to consider the indispensability of collaboration in the efforts to create culturally specific healthcare systems.

Another major theme that was discussed during the session was the importance of social determinants of health. When evaluating health systems and suggesting improvements to optimize their performance, it is crucial that global health professionals consider the social and economic factors that influence patient care and health outcomes. For example, Gojjam Limenih discussed how a one-size-fits-all approach may not be successful when implementing mental health care around the globe; rather, it is important to understand social determinants of mental health and the differences in diagnostics that vary between cultures. Moreover, social stigma and gender roles play an important role in health service implementation. Mary Ndu discussed the various difficulties associated with implementing vasectomies in men, most of which revolved around social stigma and gender norms. Overall, global health professionals must ensure the consideration of all social determinants of health when implementing programming or interventions in LMIC.

A prevailing concept across multiple informative presentations covered in the conference was the importance of continuing education for health care providers. For example, Gojjam Limenih's presentation discussed how the diagnosis of mental health disorders has drastically changed due to research and education. Research plays a pivotal role in educating health care providers and leading health policy change to improve the delivery of health care services. Furthermore, continuing education provides health care workers with the competencies and confidence to practice in academic and clinical settings. For example, Amy Olson found that training sessions gave nurses the practice and confidence to care for their patients and to trust their own knowledge when assessing patient symptoms, instead of waiting for doctors' orders. In addition to this, Aimable Nkurunziza's research regarding medication interruptions in pediatric units led to interventions such as training nurses for the purpose of minimizing interruptions such as technical problems. Thus, refresher courses and education programs can improve the quality of patient care and health outcomes. Additionally, continuing education provides the foundation for professional development. Sibylle Ugirase's presentation described one of the most important aspects in healthcare delivery today- interprofessional communication. Complex patient care needs, paired with a variety of specialists to care for patients, can result in interprofessional conflict that may harm patient outcomes. Thus, courses that integrate communication practices between various professionals should be implemented in professionals schools to ensure seamless transitions into working environments, where these professionals will work collaboratively with others to better meet the needs of their patients.

In conclusion, mental health, knowledge translation, social determinants of health, and continuing education are core themes within global health that must be understood in order to foster and manage successful health systems.