

## Our Approach to Building Sustainable Mental Health Services as part of general health care



The impact of mental illness on many of the world's nations, coupled with an alarming shortfall in accessible treatment options, led International Medical Corps to make sustainable, accessible mental health care a cornerstone of our relief and development programming. We have developed our capacity to address both the immediate psychosocial needs of communities struck by disaster or crises and help those with pre-existing mental health disorders. Whether in relief or development settings, our mental health and psychosocial programs are informed by local needs, build on existing community resources and structures, involve training of national counterparts, and are designed to be integrated into existing services such as health or nutrition. This ensures that services are community-driven, accessible, non-stigmatizing, and sustainable. We have implemented mental health and psychosocial programs in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, as well as in the United States after Hurricane Katrina.



Aside from being cost-effective, offering services through existing primary health care centers at the community level is an accessible, non-stigmatizing way to offer local populations assistance. International Medical Corps has been involved in the development of the WHO mhGAP Intervention Guide which covers the identification, management and referral of mental health priority conditions for general health care providers. Key aspects of our strategy include:

- ▶ **Advocacy:** Highlight to stakeholders, including donors and operational agencies, that the international community has the tools available to improve care for individuals with mental, neurological, and substance abuse disorders, thereby closing the gap between the needs and what is currently available. IMC has been actively engaged in advocacy efforts on Capitol Hill in the US as well as the United Nations and with individual governments to include mental health on the global public health agenda.
- ▶ **Government Partnerships:** Work in partnership with governments to assess existing health systems and policies and design programs that maximize the use of existing government health care infrastructure, and resources, are consistent with national capacities and strategies and promote sustainability.
- ▶ **Strengthening Existing Structures:** Build positive relationships with informal providers of health care and support such as community leaders who can be valuable allies as well as important guides through the local culture. IMC has worked with traditional healers in Sierra Leone, Chad and other countries to promote mutual learning and understanding and set up referral mechanisms.
- ▶ **Training:** Adapt existing materials and guidelines including the WHO mhGAP guide to the local social and cultural context and to existing training needs. Provide intensive theoretical training sessions to local health professionals over several months to recognize and treat and refer cases of mental disorders.
- ▶ **Supervision:** Follow-up theoretical training with mentorship, on the job supervision and case discussions to ensure that the content of training is effectively put into practice.
- ▶ **Promoting Positive Attitudes Towards Mental Illness:** Change attitudes towards those affected by mental illness through community awareness raising and psycho-education and strengthening support networks among those affected by mental illness and the community.
- ▶ **Institutional Capacity Building:** Work with clinic management to integrate mental health into service provision through implementing quality standards, supporting HMIS data collection, and holding referral workshops to strengthen networks among service providers.
- ▶ **Program Evaluation:** Evaluate the results of our programming through KAP (Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices) tests, on-the-job-supervision checklists, institutional quality checklists, client and family satisfaction surveys and feedback from trainees, managers and other stakeholders. Our MH PHC integration program in Lebanon is now informing national policy and will be featured in a special issue of Intervention Journal (fall 2011).

International Medical Corps has completed or ongoing mental health programs integrated into general health care in Sierra Leone, Haiti, Aceh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Jordan, Syria, Gaza, Iraq, Turkey and Lebanon.

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