Are mental health problems in children being neglected?

Preliminary results from SeeTheChild – Mental Child Health in Uganda

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Aim
To explore how caregivers perceived and experienced child mental health, and what influenced their help-seeking behaviour in the social and cultural context of Mbale region, Eastern Uganda.

Methods
Study participants were caregivers of children aged 5-10 years.

Ten caregivers of children with a high symptom load (≥16) and ‘impact scores’ on The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire1 (SDQ) from the study ‘PROMISE Saving Brains’2 were selected as key informants for repeat in-depth interviews.

Eight focus group discussions with caregivers selected from the general population in Mbale district.

Data collection: July-October 2014.

Illustration photo, by V. Skylstad

Findings
Help-seeking practices

- Children’s emotional health and behaviour were a community responsibility, advice on help-seeking were sought from peers.
- Traditional healers and religious leaders were considered more appropriate than the public health services for seeking help.

Explanatory factors

- Mental health as a medical concern, including child psychiatric issues, were generally unfamiliar to caregivers.
- Mental health characteristics were seen as inherited from ancestors or caused by malevolent spirits.
- Naming after ancestors was important for inheriting mental health characteristics - renaming was done to change characteristics.

Catalysts for help-seeking in the public health services

- Somatic symptoms, such as hydrocephalus and seizures, activated help-seeking.
- Severe mental health case descriptions, such as alcohol abuse or suicidal attempts, did not activate help-seeking.
- Behavioural characteristics, such as opposition towards parents, were sometimes regarded as ‘brightness’ or ‘self-confidence.’

Conclusion
Mental health as a medical concern, including child psychiatric issues, completely differed from the care-givers’ understanding and interpretation of child mental health. This resulted in delay or absence of mental health help-seeking for children in the public health services, which was perceived as inaccessible or irrelevant.

References
1. Norwegian research council GLOBVAC RCT #220887
2. SeeTheChild – Mental Child Health in Uganda
3. The Medical Student Research Programme at The Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry

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