

FIRST CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH CONFERENCE IN NIGERIA
COLLEGE OF MEDICINE, UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN
14 – 16 JUNE 2016

CONFERENCE COMMUNIQUE

From Tuesday 14th June to Thursday 16th June 2016, the University of Ibadan Centre for Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CCAMH) hosted the very first Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMH) conference in Nigeria at the College of Medicine, University of Ibadan, University College Hospital Ibadan Campus, Nigeria. The conference was held in collaboration with the African Association for Child & Adolescent Mental Health (AACAMH), the Association for Child & Adolescent Psychiatry & Allied Professions in Nigeria (ACAPAN) and the Department of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, University College Hospital (UCH), Ibadan.

In her welcome address, the Conference Convenor and Director of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Funded Centre for Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CCAMH), Professor Olayinka Omigbodun, stressed that the conference themed “**Child Mental Health for Nation Building**” was convened to bring child and adolescent mental health professionals together from across the Nation and the entire continent of Africa to draw much needed attention to the poor state of mental health of infants, children and adolescents and more importantly to seek solutions to the unfortunate situation. She pointed out that the leaders of Africa today were children yesterday and that depending on their childhood experiences, learning opportunities and role models, they were now ruling nations and we were experiencing the impact of their leadership. She reiterated that the overall aim of the conference was to explore and identify priorities for optimizing psychological functioning among youth as well as to strengthen cooperation between all stakeholders involved in youth mental health. She quoted from a Nigerian leader whose vision and foresight captured the essence of child mental health for nation building as he wrote: “*It is only when minds have been properly and rigorously cultivated and garnished, that they can be safely entrusted with public affairs with a certainty and assuredness that they will make the best of their unique opportunity and assignment.*” Obafemi Awolowo, 1967.

The Provost of the College of Medicine, University of Ibadan, Professor Babatunde Salako, declared the 3-day conference open.

During the conference, a total of 10 plenary lectures, 12 workshops, 6 symposia and several free papers around the theme of child and adolescent mental health were delivered in parallel sessions. The distinguished plenary speakers and workshop facilitators at this pioneer conference were Professor Naoufel Gaddour, President of the Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health (AACAMH), from University of Monastir, Tunisia; Dr. Oluwayemi Ogun, President of the Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professions in Nigeria (ACAPAN), as well as Chief Consultant Psychiatrist, Federal Neuro Psychiatric Hospital, Yaba, Lagos; Dr. Cornelius Ani, Child Psychiatrist and Paediatrician, Imperial College London; Dr. Olayinka Egbokhare, Department of Communication and Language Arts, University of Ibadan; Dr. Olapeju Simoyan, Associate Professor of Family Medicine and Epidemiology, The Commonwealth Medical College, Scranton, USA; Professor Afolabi Lesi, Paediatric Neurologist and leading researcher in Child Development, University of Lagos; Dr. Ezer Kang, Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology, Howard University, Washington DC, USA; and Mrs Noreen Huni, Chief Executive Officer, of a 13-country regional NGO Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI), with headquarters in South Africa, that provides psychosocial care and support for children and youth affected by poverty.

Over the three-day period the participants attended plenary sessions, workshops, symposia, and free oral sessions. In line with the theme of the conference, a special leadership training session for youth was held during the conference which encouraged them to think about leadership and mentoring roles, communication skills for these roles, creative thinking and thinking outside the box. A mental health literacy programme was also put in place to help them to better understand mental health and illness. Comments and resolutions from the youth participants who consisted of secondary school and university students included their perceptions of a good leader as the “*sharp point of an arrow*”, a “*caring,*

concerned personality”, a “*trailblazer, not a boss*”. Universally, the youth expressed desires to be good, loving and exemplary leaders.

There were over 100 delegates from various sub regions of Africa including the countries of Eritrea, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tunisia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. There were also delegates from the United States of America, and the United Kingdom. The conference brought together experts from the fields of Administration, Communication and Language Arts, Education, Family Health, Nursing, Paediatrics, Psychiatry, Psychology, Public Health, Reproductive Health, Social Work; as well as parents, teachers and school children.

At the grand finale of the conference, which took place on June 16, 2016, the Day of the African Child, the Honourable Minister of Health of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Professor Isaac Adewole *FAS*, stressed the importance of child mental health through his representative, the Chief Medical Director of the University of Lagos Teaching Hospital, Professor Chris Bode. Professor George Ademowo, Dean of Basic Sciences, College of Medicine who represented the Vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, Professor Idowu Olayinka and Professor Ademola Ajuwon who represented the Provost of the College of Medicine both stressed the timeliness of the theme of the conference. The Chairman, Medical Advisory Committee, University College Hospital, Ibadan, Dr. Adefemi Afolabi also attended the grand finale of this pioneer event. The Day of the African Child is held on the 16th of June every year to commemorate the killing of school children during a protest against apartheid-based education in Soweto, South Africa, in 1976. This day also presents an opportunity to focus on the roles of all stakeholders involved in upholding the rights of the African child, and to renew efforts towards eliminating the existing obstacles to the realization of these rights.

A poetry rendition titled ‘*Build a Child, Build a Nation*’ delivered by 7-year old Miss Oluwatofunmi Ajayi received a standing ovation. The Director of CCAMH presented the third set of 15 graduating students on the Master of Science degree programme in CAMH to the public, bringing to a total of 43 who had completed the MSc. CAMH from the 5 countries of Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Dr. Ronita Luke of the Ministry of Health, Sierra Leone received the award for the most outstanding graduating student in the third set.

At the end of three days of deliberations, the following conclusions and recommendations were made:

1. Urgent Need for the Governments of Nigeria and other African Countries to Address the Mental Health Needs of Children and Adolescents

Delegates discussed extensively the urgent need for the governments of Nigeria and other African countries to focus their attention on the plight of children and adolescents because most of them face a life of poverty, and poor physical and mental health. These factors hinder their ability to develop into healthy adults, live an improved quality of life, and fulfil their life aspirations. Up until quite recently, virtually all social and health interventions for children had focused on the major causes of mortality, such as malaria, respiratory tract infections, gastroenteritis, meningitis and HIV/AIDS, to the neglect of mental health issues. This has serious consequences for child development and consequently nation building. With the decline in child mortality in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa, social and health interventions need to move towards creating a **mentally healthy environment** for the youth who will remain alive and lead this region into the future. Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMH) defined as, “*Optimal psychological development & functioning, a positive sense of self, the ability to manage thoughts, emotions & build social relationships, the aptitude to learn & acquire an education and the opportunity to ultimately be able to have full participation in society*” is vital for nation building. Just a few statistics point to the urgent need for mental health interventions in Nigeria and most of Africa. Over 50% of the region’s population are children and adolescents, one in every 5 children or adolescents will have a mental disorder and over 50% of adult mental disorders begin before the age of 14 years. Africa houses the largest number of out-of-school children and HIV/AIDS orphans in the world.

2. Need for Continuous Evidence Gathering for Advocacy, Policy and Programming for Child and Adolescent Mental Health

The importance of the continued generation of research evidence to support the existing burden of child and adolescent mental health challenges, and the efficacy of tested interventions was revealed at the conference. The attention of delegates was drawn to the fact that globally, countries, agencies and funders are realising the importance of Child & Adolescent Mental Health because it determines the future health & wellbeing of the adult population, the future economic & social development of nations, and the health & wellbeing of generations to come. The importance of location or ‘place’ in the outcomes of young people living with chronic disorders such as HIV and mental illness was also expounded. It was emphasized that when providers see individual clients they are only getting a snap shot view and they need to understand the ecological systems, which surround them so they can be able to really help. It was stressed that more than ever before, there was increasing evidence of effective mental health interventions. Depression and suicide were stated as leading causes of death and disability in adolescents and young people worldwide and there was an urgent need to address these. Students in the Centre for Child and Adolescent had shown the feasibility of several interventions for depressed adolescents, and aggressive children in the context of Nigeria and the urgent need to scale up.

3. Importance of Communication for Optimal Child and Adolescent Mental Health Care

Delegates at the conference explored the dimensions of effective communication in mental health delivery and identified problems associated with mental health communication as stigma, lack of awareness and misinformation. The need for stakeholders to work hand in hand with the media was reiterated. Communication should not be left solely in the hands of mental health specialists, but should be the duty for everyone as we are all providers of mental health care to young people in the home, school, community or specialised care centres. Providers of mental health care needed to improve verbal and nonverbal communication skills and always transmit hope and put on a YES face. A lot more needed to be done in terms of advocacy to make the state fulfil its obligations to the child by ensuring that they get the right kind of information on mental health across to the general public. This can be done by engaging the existing culture industry especially the well acclaimed Nollywood as well as the vibrant mobile media and in particular the social media. The need to demystify mental illness so that patients, families and community workers could be empowered to be the first line of providers for young people was stressed.

4. Urgent Need for School Health Programme with Mental Health and Nutrition as critical components and Education of the Girl child

The links between food, nutrition, mental health and nation building were discussed. Common nutritional deficiencies such as iron and iodine have detrimental effects on the developing brain and consequently on mental health. Stunted children earn 20% less than their peers in adulthood and the cost to the nation is estimated at 13 billion dollars annually. It was emphasized that it was the collective responsibility of the governments and all stakeholders of the region to ensure proper development of children’s brains because children are the leaders of tomorrow and if their brains suffer through nutritional deficiencies, the type of leadership they will be able to provide will be problematic. An urgent need for quality stimulating education, nutrition for children, access to health care including mental health services achieved through a proper school health programme was an urgent need in the nation and other African countries. For teachers and school personnel closely involved with children, providing training in topics pertaining to child and adolescent mental health was very important and a potentially effective approach to equipping them with skills for improving the mental health of the children and adolescents they interact with.

Schools were also identified as ideal places to intervene in children’s psychosocial well being so that children can feel happy, secure and nurtured all through their school years. Children spend several years in school and the school years should not be like being in prison but should be a positive stimulating environment.

The delegates discussed the fact that students in higher institutions including universities, nursing schools, and polytechnics were an often neglected group, regarded as “independent adults”, but who were frequently still dependent and in need of support. It was stressed that policies were urgently needed in our educational institutions to support young people at risk of mental health challenges, and to ease re-integration for those who are recovering from episodes of mental illness.

The link between girl-child education and the health of children was discussed. Women who are educated up to at least secondary school level were more likely to have children who suffer less mortality and morbidity. It was stressed that every child should have access to quality education.

5. Children within the Juvenile Justice System

The difficult and derelict conditions in which children in the custodial section of the Juvenile justice system in Nigeria and other African countries were kept were a major cause for concern and discussion at the conference. There is a need to implement Article 40 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states as follows: *“Those who commit crimes should be treated in a manner consistent with the promotion of the child's sense of dignity and worth. Facilities for counselling; probation; foster care; education & vocational training programmes & other alternatives to institutional care shall be available”*. Participants wanted it emphasised that governments should immediately ensure children within the juvenile justice system are entitled to optimal mental health so that they can be integrated back into society and be involved in nation building.

6. Networking & Inter-sectorial collaboration and Self-Care for Child & Adolescent Mental Healthcare Providers

The need for networking and collaboration between professionals working with children and adolescents was explored during this conference. It was observed that there are so many different services being offered for children but a general lack of awareness by others working in the field. The efforts of the Centre for Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CCAMH) in bringing people together to facilitate networking and awareness was commended and individuals were encouraged to reach out and come out of their disciplinary silos to better understand social and other determinants of health. Effective communication among multidisciplinary teams involved in the care of children and adolescents was stressed as important for effective care provision and a key way to providing this was to have training programmes for the various disciplines involved in child mental health care as operates in CCAMH. Self-care for mental health care providers was also stressed. Mental health care providers needed support because of their roles in managing the large mental health burden in developing settings with very little in terms of resources.

Conclusion

There is no Child Health without Child Mental Health and the Children's Mental Health is the Nation's Future Wealth! Governments should ensure the full implementation of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, the Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) and the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Mental Health Action Plan (2013-2020), which has components for promotion, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, care and recovery, as these are would ensure that every child attains optimal psychological development and functioning. Delegates were hopeful that their coming together at this pioneer conference in Nigeria and their collective efforts would represent a significant milestone in the quest for a safe, secure, healthy and mentally enabling environment for the development of the infant, children and adolescent—the leaders of tomorrow.

Conference Committee Members

Dr. Tolulope Bella-Awusah- **Academic**

Dr. Jibril Abdulmalik – **Publicity**

Dr. Olurotimi Adejumo- **Publications**

Dr. Yetunde Adeniyi- **Logistics**

Prof. Olayinka Omigbodun- **Conference Convenor, Director, CCAMH &**

Head of Psychiatry, College of Medicine, University of Ibadan/University College Hospital, Ibadan