

LETTER TO EDITOR/ CARTA AO EDITOR

Global Health in Psychiatry Training in Portugal: A Collaborative Project to Improve Mental Health Education in Guinea-Bissau Saúde Global no Internato de Psiquiatria em Portugal: um Projeto de Cooperação para Melhorar a Educação em Saúde Mental na Guiné-Bissau

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Evidence of social issues being key factors for the continuity or aggravation of mental health illnesses, awareness of the global burden of such conditions, inadequate investment in mental health and difficulty in accessing quality care were all central to the formation of Global Mental Health (GMH) as a concept.¹ Among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) established by the United Nations to be achieved by 2030, there is a specific reference to reduction by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention, treatment and promotion of mental health and well-being and strengthening of the prevention and treatment of substance abuse.² The SDG represent an historical opportunity to enhance the action, after years of research and practice in the field of GMH.¹

Global health has already gained relevance in medical training. Psychiatry training presents fewer opportunities compared to other medical areas, e.g.: in 2013 the possibilities of training in the field of GMH could be found only

in 17 psychiatry residency programs in the United States.^{3,4} The awareness of the consequences of mental illness, the limited resources available for providing mental health services and the lack of professionals with adequate training in low- and middle-income countries are among the reasons to its inclusion in the curriculum.⁴

In countries where GMH is already a component of the medical training curriculum, teaching is based on seminars that cover subjects such as transcultural psychiatry, anthropology, mental health policies and services. The training itself is aimed at developing collaborative interventions which include an equal exchange between participating countries.⁴ Human rights violations in such countries are frequent, which makes advocating for human rights one of the priorities in these intervention projects.⁵ For the residents from the training country, including GMH in medical training increases the likelihood of exposure to mental health conditions in more advanced stages, which would otherwise be difficult for the trainees to observe. For the

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receiving country, it presents an opportunity to increase its experience in diagnostic and treatment skills.⁶ Another particularly important advantage of its inclusion is to stimulate the trainees' personal and cultural development. In 2010, a survey administered to psychiatry residents from the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York showed that the participation in GMH electives enhanced the physician skills of the participants (empathy and communication in the patient-doctor interaction) and allowed them to take conscience of the public health care systems abroad, promoting the desire for change.⁷ According to the 2018 revision of the *Union Européenne des Médecins Spécialistes* (UEMS) — Section of Psychiatry's Standing Committee on Training, European psychiatrists should, in addition to their technical skills, develop skills in the areas of communication, leadership, effective teamwork and health education — skills that not only can but should be developed outside a hospital setting.⁸

THE PROJECT

The Lisbon International Learning Program on Mental Health Policies and Services, developed by the Lisbon Institute of Global Mental Health in 2017, brought together mental health professionals from around the world. Through this course, it was possible to establish contact with the director of the Mental Health Centre of Bissau (Guinea-Bissau) — one of the poorest countries in the world, where there are no psychiatrists. Between 1983 and 1994, Professor De Jong, a psychiatrist, inspired by the World Health Organization (WHO) Collaborative Study on Strategies for Extending Mental Health into Primary Health Care, developed a community mental health program that brought about improvements in the quality of care. By 1985, WHO considered Guinea-Bissau to be the first third world country to succeed in integrating a social-psychiatric program into its basic health care services, on a national level.⁹ Due to political instability during 1998, the project was suspended, and the Mental Health Centre of Bissau was decommissioned. It was re-established in 2016 thanks to the support from the European Union and is now operating as the only center for this type of care in the country, receiving patients nationwide. There is no financial support for the center, making all the income dependent on the charges for the medical appointment fees. The estimated volume of patients passing through the center, based on data given by its clinical director, is about 1000 per year.

With the Portuguese language as a common feature of both countries and the bilateral agreement in cooperation, a project was developed. A collaborative project was created between Portuguese trainees and specialists in Psychiatry and a Portuguese non-governmental organization (NGO) called *Mundo a Sorrir* (*Smiling World*), which operates in the country since 2005. The result was the project: *Saúde a Sorrir – Saúde Mental Bissau*.

The pilot project, which involved a young Portuguese psychiatry trainee, took place in May 2018. Once in Bissau, the first step was to assess both the needs of the patients

and the resources available. The latter proved to be a challenge: the Mental Health Centre of Bissau has no electricity or piped water, little access to diagnostic tests or specific medication, and works exclusively as an outpatient unit due to lack of security measures.

During the project, a meeting with the Minister of Health provided the opportunity to express the bilateral will for the development of further collaborative projects. In addition, a national radio station – Radio Bombolom – showed interest in a broadcast session aimed at raising awareness about mental health and illness in the general population, which resulted in an interview, followed by a Q&A session with the audience. Finally, a partnership with the Faculty of Medicine of the Piaget Institute of Bissau was established, in order to provide lectures and practical seminars about psychiatry and mental health care to the students on their fifth year. The practical seminars took place in the Mental Health Centre of Bissau. The students attended the medical appointments in the presence of both a doctor of the center and the voluntary. The collaboration with the Faculty received good reviews from the students, which led to a formal agreement of collaboration for the subsequent year. In 2019, two missions took place, based on this agreement. A total of 63 students have already benefited from the project. In 2020, due to the COVID pandemic, the project was suspended.

CHALLENGES AND PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE

The establishment of a formal agreement of collaboration between *Mundo a Sorrir*, the Faculty of Medicine of the Piaget Institute of Bissau and the Mental Health Centre of Bissau has encouraged us to keep working on this project. In the near future, many factors are vital to take into account. In order to facilitate the participation of Psychiatry trainees, *Saúde a Sorrir – Saúde Mental Bissau* project could become an elective component of the Community Psychiatry rotation or an optional rotation, if Portuguese specialists in Psychiatry interested in this field agree to supervise the trainees. This would enable an extension of the duration of the missions. That would allow a development of a sustainable intervention plan to improve the quality of mental health care. Besides, the development of GMH programs in Psychiatry residency training in Portugal will be needed so the trainees further develop their knowledge. Overall, albeit modest in size, this project represents a step forward for the promotion of well-being, equity, and reduction of the treatment gap for people affected by mental disorders in Guinea-Bissau.

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