

Outcome Evaluation of a Blended-Learning Mental Health Training Course in South African Public Health Facilities

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Abstract : The South African National Mental Health Education Programme (SANMHEP) was a National Department of Health (NDoH) initiative to strengthen mental health services in South Africa in collaboration with the Foundation for Professional Development (FPD), SANOFI and the various provincial departments of health. The programme was implemented against the backdrop of a number of challenges in the management of mental health in the country related to staff shortages and infrastructure, the intersection of mental health with the growing burden of non-communicable diseases and various forms of violence, and challenges around substance abuse and its relationship with mental health. The Mental Health Care Act (No. 17 of 2002) prescribes that mental health should be integrated into general health services including primary, secondary and tertiary levels to improve access to services and reduce stigma associated with mental illness. In order for the provisions of the Act to become a reality, and for the journey of mental health patients through the system to improve, sufficient and skilled health care providers are critical. SANMHEP specifically targeted Medical Doctors and Professional Nurses working within the facilities that are listed to conduct 72-hour assessments, as well as District Hospitals. The aim of the programme was to improve the clinical diagnosis and management of mental disorders/conditions and the understanding of and compliance with the Mental Health Care Act and related Regulations and Guidelines in the care, treatment and rehabilitation of mental health care users. The course used a blended-learning approach and trained 1 120 health care providers through 36 workshops between February and November 2019. Of those trained, 689 (61.52%) were Professional Nurses, 337 (30.09%) were Medical Doctors, and 91 (8.13%) indicated their occupation as 'other' (of these more than half were psychologists). The pre- and post-evaluation of the face-to-face training sessions indicated a marked improvement in knowledge and confidence level scores (both clinical and legislative) in the care, treatment and rehabilitation of mental health care users by participants in all the training sessions. There was a marked improvement in the knowledge and confidence of participants in performing certain mental health activities (on average the ratings increased by 2.72; or 27%) and in managing certain mental health conditions (on average the ratings increased by 2.55; or 25%). The course also required that participants obtain 70% or higher in their formal assessments as part of the online component. The 337 participants who completed and passed the course scored 90% on average. This illustrates that when participants attempted and completed the course, they did very well. To further assess the effect of the course on the knowledge and behaviour of the trained mental health care practitioners a mixed-method outcome evaluation is currently underway consisting of a survey with participants three months after completion, follow-up interviews with participants, and key informant interviews with department of health officials and course facilitators. This will enable a more detailed assessment of the impact of the training on participants' perceived ability to manage and treat mental health patients.

Keywords : mental health, public health facilities, South Africa, training

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