

Perception of Health Care Providers: A Need to Introduce Screening of Maternal Mental Health at Primary Health Care in Nepal

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Abstract : Background: Although mental health policy has been adapted in Nepal since 1997, the implementation of the policy framework is yet to happen. The fact that mental health services are largely concentrated in urban areas more specific to treatment only provides a clear picture of the scarcity of mental health services in the country. The shreds of evidence from around the world, along with WHO's (World Health Organization) Mental Health Gap Action Program (mhGAP) suggest that effective mental health services can be provided from Primary Health Care (PHC) centers through community-based programs without having to place a specialized health worker. However, the country is still facing the same challenges to date with very few psychiatrists and psychologists, but they are largely based in cities. Objectives: The main objectives of this study are; (a) to understand the perception of health workers at PHC on maternal mental health, and (b) to assess the availability of the mental health services at PHC to address maternal mental health. Methods: This study used a qualitative approach where an in-depth interview was conducted with the health workers at the primary level. "Mayadevi" rural municipality in Rupendehi District that comprised of 13 small villages, was chosen as the study site. A total 8 health institutions which covered all 13 sites were included where either the health post in-charge or health worker working in maternal and child health care was interviewed for the study. All the health posts in the study area were included in the study. The interviews were conducted in Nepali; later, they were translated in English, transcribed, and triangulated. NViVO was used for the analysis. Results: The findings show that most of the health workers understood what maternal mental health was and deemed it as a public health issue. They could explain the symptoms and knew what medication to prescribe if need be. However, the majority of them failed to name the screening tools in place for maternal mental health. Moreover, they hadn't even seen one. None of the health care centers had any provision for screening mental health status. However, one of the centers prescribed medication when the patients displayed symptoms of depression. But they believed there were a significant number of hidden cases in the community due to the stigma around mental health and being a woman with mental health problem makes the situation even difficult. Nonetheless, the health workers understood the importance of having screening tools and acknowledged the need of training and support in order to provide the services from PHC. Conclusion: Community health workers can identify cases with mental health problems and prevent them from deteriorating further. But there is a need for robust training and support to build the capacity of the health workers. The screening tools on mental health needs to be encouraged to be used in the PHC levels. Furthermore, community-based culture-sensitive programs need to be initiated and implemented to mitigate the stigma related issues around mental health.

Keywords : maternal mental health, health care providers, screening, Nepal

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