ORIGINAL ARTICLE   🔓 OPEN ACCESS

The landscape of mental health care landscape in asia: issues and challenges

Shawn Yong-Shian Goh[1,*] (ID)

[1] Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies, National University of Singapore, Lower Kent Ridge Road, Singapore

*Correspondence: Shawn Yong-Shian Goh. Address: Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies, National University of Singapore, Lower Kent Ridge Road, Singapore. Email: shawngoh@nus.edu.sg

Mental health care in Asia is an evolving field marked by both rapid advancements and persistent challenges. While some countries in the region have made significant strides in improving mental health services, others are still grappling with stigma, insufficient infrastructure, and limited access to care. Asia's unique cultural, socio-economic, and political factors further complicate this landscape, making mental health care a multifaceted issue that requires comprehensive yet tailored solutions for the respective countries.

Cultural Stigma and Misconceptions

The stigma associated with mental health conditions (MHCs) has been one of the most pervasive challenges across Asia. It is deeply rooted and reinforced by traditional beliefs that MHCs result from supernatural causes, moral failings, and even personal weakness. This results in shame faced by many patients and their caregivers alike, leading to social ostracism and discrimination.

For example, in countries like China, Korea, and Thailand, mental health is often not openly discussed, and individuals suffering from conditions like depression or anxiety are encouraged to "tough it out" or "snap out of it, I also can do it" rather than seek professional help (Lam and Sun, 2014, Zhang et al., 2019). The stigma experienced by individuals with MHCs discourages them from seeking treatment, exacerbating their conditions and leading to severe consequences (Tan and Goh, 2023), including suicide (Targum and Kitanaka, 2012).

To address this issue, public awareness campaigns and education are crucial (Pang et al., 2017, Zhang et al., 2019). Governments, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and healthcare providers must work together to fight myths about MHCs and promote the idea that help-seeking in mental health is an essential step towards recovery. Although changing cultural attitudes within a society is slow, mental health professionals must spearhead this effort to create an environment where mental health is treated with the same importance as physical health.

Insufficient Infrastructure and Resources

Another significant challenge in mental health care across Asia is the lack of adequate infrastructure and resources. Many countries in this region face a shortage of mental health professionals, facilities, and funding. This shortage is particularly acute in rural areas, where access to mental health services is often non-existent.

For instance, in India, the ratio of psychiatrists to the population stands at only 0.3 per 100,000 people, with mental health services concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural populations underserved (Behere et al., 2020). Similarly, in Indonesia, mental health services are limited, and the country has only about 1200 psychiatrists for a population of over 270 million people (Rayda, 2023). This lack of infrastructure is compounded by limited government funding for mental health care, resulting in inadequate facilities, outdated treatment methods, and insufficient support for mental health professionals (Ng, 2018).

To overcome these challenges, governments need to invest in mental health care, expand the training and recruitment of mental health professionals, develop accessible community-based mental health services (Tan and Goh, 2022) and even explore using online platforms to reach underserved populations (Wainberg et al., 2017, Alegría et al., 2022).

Integration of Mental Health Service into Primary Health

Another challenge for mental health services is to integrate them into primary care. In many countries, mental health care is still seen as a speciality, separate from general health care. This creates barriers to access,

as individuals must navigate the healthcare system to receive the help they need. In countries like Thailand and Malaysia, efforts are being made to integrate mental health care into primary care settings, the implementation is slow, and many primary care providers lack the training and resources to effectively manage mental health conditions (Ng, 2018, Lemon *et al.*, 2023).

Successful integration requires training healthcare providers in mental health and ensuring that primary care facilities have the necessary resources, such as access to psychiatric consultations, medications, and support services. There is also the need to have a mindset shift where mental health gains recognition as an essential component of overall well-being rather than a separate issue (Funk *et al.*, 2008, Ooi *et al.*, 2021).

Emerging Challenges: Technology and Mental Health

While technological advancements offer new opportunities for improving mental health care, they also present new challenges. The rise of digital mental health platforms and telemedicine can potentially expand care access to underserved communities in remote areas. However, these technologies also raise concerns about data privacy, the quality of care provided, and the potential for over-reliance on digital solutions at the expense of face-to-face interactions.

In countries like South Korea and Japan, where digital health care is rapidly developing, clear guidelines and regulations must ensure that the services are safe, effective, and accessible to all. Moreover, while technology can be a valuable tool in mental health care, it should complement traditional mental health services rather than replace them.

Another emerging challenge is the impact of social media and the internet on mental health. The widespread use of social media platforms has been linked to increased incidences of depression and anxiety particularly among young people (Plackett *et al.*, 2023, Koh *et al.*, 2024). In countries like India, where internet usage is rapidly increasing, there is a growing need to address the mental health implications of using social media (Chandra *et al.*, 2023).

Conclusion

The challenges facing mental health care in Asia are complex and multifaceted, requiring coordinated efforts from governments, NGOs, and mental health professionals. While there are significant changes in many areas, much work remains to be done to ensure the accessibility of mental health services across all individuals in Asia. Addressing the stigma surrounding mental illness, improving infrastructure and resources, integrating mental health into primary care, tackling socio-economic determinants and navigating the challenges of technology are all essential steps towards creating a more inclusive and effective mental health care system in Asia. The journey is long, but meaningful change is within reach with sustained commitment and collaboration.

References

Alegría, M., et al. (2022). A New Agenda for Optimizing Investments in Community Mental Health and Reducing Disparities. Am J Psychiatry, 179.6, 402-416.doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.21100970

Behere, P. B., et al. (2020). Innovation in Community Psychiatry for the Delivery of Mental Health Services: The Sawangi Model. J Neurosci Rural Pract, 11.4, 593-596.doi: 10.1055/s-0040-1715543

Chandra, V., et al. (2023). Digital Dilemmas: A Comprehensive Review of the Psychosocial and Sleep Effects of Web Streaming on the Indian Youth. Cureus, 15.12, e51096.doi: 10.7759/cureus.51096

Funk, M., et al. (2008). Integrating mental health into primary healthcare. Ment Health Fam Med, 5.1, 5-8.doi:

Koh, G. K., et al. (2024). Social media use and its impact on adults' mental health and well-being: A scoping review. Worldviews Evid Based Nurs, 21.4, 345-394.doi: 10.1111/wvn.12727

Lam, T. P. & Sun, K. S. (2014). Stigmatizing opinions of chinese toward different types of mental illnesses: a qualitative study in Hong Kong. Int J Psychiatry Med, 48.3, 217-28.doi: 10.2190/PM.48.3.f

Lemon, C. A., et al. (2023). Priorities for research promoting mental health in the south and east of Asia. The Lancet Regional Health : Southeast Asia, 23. 100287.doi: 10.1016/j.lansea.2023.100287

Ng, C. H. (2018). Mental health and integration in Asia Pacific. BJPsych Int, 15.4, 76-79.doi: 10.1192/bji.2017.28

Ooi, N. P. C., et al. (2021). Integrating mental healthcare in primary care in Singapore. Annals: Official Journal of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore, 50.10.doi: 10.47102/annals-acadmedsg.2021156

Pang, S., et al. (2017). Stigma among Singaporean youth: a cross-sectional study on adolescent attitudes towards serious mental illness and social tolerance in a multiethnic population. BMJ Open, 7.10, e016432.doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2017-016432

Plackett, R., et al. (2023). The Impact of Social Media Use Interventions on Mental Well-Being: Systematic Review. J Med Internet Res, 25. e44922.doi: 10.2196/44922

Rayda, N. 2023. More Indonesians seeking online help for mental health issues amid social stigma and shortage of psychologists [Online]. Singapore Available: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/indonesia-mental-health-more-seeking-help-psychologists-shortage-3788691 [Accessed 15 August 2024].

Tan, R. X. R. & Goh, Y. S. (2022). Community Mental Health Interventions for People with Major Depressive Disorder: A Scoping Review. International Journal of Mental Health Nursing, 31.6, 1315-1359.doi: 10.1111/inm.13029

Tan, R. X. R. & Goh, Y. S. (2023). Perceptions of community mental health services among culturally-diverse adult Singaporeans with major depressive disorder: A descriptive qualitative study International Journal of Mental Health Nursing, 33.1, 143-158.doi: 10.1111/inm.13228

Targum, S. D. & Kitanaka, J. (2012). Overwork suicide in Japan: a national crisis. Innov Clin Neurosci, 9.2, 35-8.doi:

Wainberg, M. L., et al. (2017). Challenges and Opportunities in Global Mental Health: a Research-to-Practice Perspective. Curr Psychiatry Rep, 19.5, 28.doi: 10.1007/s11920-017-0780-z

Zhang, Z., et al. (2019). Overview of Stigma against Psychiatric Illnesses and Advancements of Anti-Stigma Activities in Six Asian Societies. Int J Environ Res Public Health, 17.1.doi: 10.3390/ijerph17010280