Dear editor

While the toll due to infectious diseases in developing countries still continues to be in endemic proportions, the unfortunate reality is that the non-communicable illnesses are also on the rise. Children and adolescents constitute the most vulnerable group. They form the most neglected group as well. The prevalence of physical illnesses obscures the awareness of mental health burden. It is estimated that the world-wide prevalence of child and adolescent mental disorders is around 20%.[1]

Child mental health has been mostly neglected by our policy makers. National Mental Health Program does not have space for the children. Around 90% of children with a mental health disorder are not currently receiving any specialist service.[2] About 50% of all the mental illnesses begin before the age of 14. [3] In the developing world there is an almost universal lack of enough trained personnel to staff even basic child and adolescent mental health treatment facilities.[4]

The above aspects should be viewed seriously because untreated childhood mental disorders are known to take a dangerous shape in adults. For example conduct disorder in children may evolve into anti-social personality in adult life, with associated criminal behaviour and drug abuse. Also mental illnesses detected and treated early are known to have a good prognosis, better recovery, with less disability.[3]

Considering the enormous deficiency of trained manpower in the field of psychiatry, the basic doctors and paediatricians should be given training in dealing with some of the childhood disorders. The need of the hour is for a good basic curriculum rather than specialization and super-specialization. Preventive aspects should be stressed as the cost of care once disease occurs is too high.

Childhood is also an important window for emotional development. Children with good emotional intelligence could face adversities better and have lesser psychiatric problems in life. Hence there should be room for emotional development, social skills training, physical exercise, nutritional improvement, etc in addition to regular academic activities in schools. Also the enormous stress on the child to achieve better ranks/marks should be addressed. World-wide, suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents.[4] This shows the level of stress that an adolescent is going through. Also the growing criminal behaviour among the youth of present generation points towards the lacunae in the psychological development of the child. The recent incidents where teachers are killed by their students[5] have left the entire society in a shock, and it is time for all of us to sit and introspect into "what is leading these tender minds to take such a dangerous turn." Such incidents were rarely reported from India till recently. Also increasing substance use among children and adolescents should be addressed. Availability of the substance is the key. Regulations should just not be confined to paper but need to be implemented. Autism is another childhood disorder that is on the rise.[6] The recent studies are pointing to the possible etiological role of "obesity, diabetes and other metabolic conditions" among the pregnant women for autism and other developmental disorders.[7] This important study gives us insight into the link between the biology and psyche, and points towards the fact that prevention should begin from the womb itself.

The prevalence of various disorders like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorders, autism, mental retardation, neurotic and psychotic illnesses, and substance abuse has been reported in various studies. But 'numbers' do not sensitize the people unless they are translated into individual cases of unhappiness and suffering that they represent in aggregate. This should be the role of 'mind specialists' and their organization' - "to improve public awareness and drive the policy makers into action." In addition to apathy of the government; stigma, lack of resources and knowledge are some of the barriers that need to be addressed for better mental health care to the child.

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References


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