

## CHILD PSYCHIATRY: CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

Pakistan is a nation with about 220 million people, ranking fifth largest population of the world<sup>1</sup>. Documenting a growth rate of about 2.4, the number of children and adolescents is significantly high. Psychological problems are found equally in children as well like adults. There are many problems which are specific to this age group and majority of them if treated in childhood, would lead to significant reduction in mental illnesses in adults. If we look at the statistics, it would help in better understanding of the problem and would help in devising strategies for possible solutions. To begin with the analysis of developed countries like America, there are more than eight thousand (8000) Child Psychiatrists for a population of 330 million, comprising 16% of them are children and adolescents below the age of 19 years<sup>2</sup>. Contrary to that, Pakistan has less than five (5) Child Psychiatrists for a population of 220 million. It is worth to mention here that the number of children and adolescents under 14 years is 34 percent of total population in Pakistan, which means that we have more than 64 million of child population out of 220 million total<sup>1</sup>. General Adult Psychiatrists can give some basic services to children but even their number is also fewer than 500 throughout the country. The situation is further complicated by huge Brain Drain from the country as evident by the fact that hundreds (if not thousands) of Pakistani Psychiatrists are working in USA and UK only. The reasons for migration of medical professionals from Pakistan to other countries are: best medical practices, attractive salaries and conducive working scenarios in these countries<sup>3</sup>. Further reasons for this migration may be lack of employment, general negative attitude of policy makers, lack of advance technology and increasing violence against doctors in Pakistan.

Child mental health in Pakistan is adversely affected by additional factors like child labor, child abuse and out of school children which again are highest in Pakistan for this region, unfortunately better only than Afghanistan<sup>4</sup>. A stable and supporting family is the best nursery for a child to gain self-confidence and ability to make and maintain trust and relationship with others. Lack of Parenting skills, sibling rivalry, gender discrimination and domestic violence, on the other hand, are some of the factors in home leading to psychological problems in children. Similarly, the schools are considered to play an important role in nurturing the hidden potentials of a child. The same school can work like a double edge sword for some students leading to shatter their personalities because of unrealistic expectations, lack of assessment of their

aptitudes and good grades being the only parameter of checking the competence of students. School Teachers are even not well versed with emotional problems of children although they have some knowledge about learning difficulties and behavioral problems. Teachers usually think that it is the home environment which needs to be addressed and they have very little insight of the role of Teachers<sup>5</sup>. School mental health is the area where we need tremendous work to promote positive mental health in children and prevent childhood psychiatric illnesses. Bullying in schools is another big problem which is mainly done by the Teachers as most of them are not trained for the purpose. These are few of the factors which are happening without any evil intention but because its significance is not known and they are leading to escalate mental health problems in children<sup>6,7</sup>.

There is lack of awareness about mental health and psychiatric illnesses in general population but this issue is even more important when we talk about childhood psychiatric illnesses like childhood depression and anxiety, attention deficit disorders, school phobias etc; where a significant controversy exists in the etiology of the illnesses<sup>8</sup>. Stigma is another factor playing its role as barrier against taking treatment from a Psychiatrist. People would generally prefer to go to spiritual healers and magicians rather than seeking treatment from mental health professionals.

The situation is definitely challenging and would need effective policies to start with. Mental health professionals would need to work together with policy makers, parents, school teachers, and children specialists. The huge gap can be addressed by adopting public health model of prevention and promotion of mental health. Parallel to that, capacity building of skilled personnel and allocation of services are mandatory. As a first step, a six months mandatory rotation in established child psychiatry units should be included in MCPS and FCPS training in Psychiatry. Another suggestion would be that the College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan (CPSP) should take urgent steps to start second fellowship in Child Psychiatry on priority basis. In the meantime, it would be fruitful if government arrange scholarship program for young Psychiatrists to do post-graduation in Child Psychiatry from developed countries along with written agreement that these fellows would come back to their parent institutions and would work here to establish services and impart training to achieve long term goals.

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