

Bulletin of the Mental Health and Specialized Programs Unit



March 2006

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The Mental Health and Specialized Programs Unit of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)/World Health Organization (WHO) is pleased to send you a new issue of its bulletin. Like the last issue, the object of this publication is to communicate important advances, news, and information on publications in the fields of mental health, the control of alcohol and substance abuse, rehabilitation, and the international protection of human rights in this context. The main objectives of this unit are to strengthen the countries' capacity to develop mental health policies, plans, programs, and services; formulate public policies for the control of alcohol abuse; prevent disabilities and achieve equal opportunities for people with disabilities; and promote and protect the human rights and fundamental liberties of people with disabilities and their families.

The Mechanism of Precautionary Measures and the Protection of Mental Health: An Important Precedent in the Inter-American Human Rights System

In February 2005, the Government of Paraguay and the NGO Mental Disability Rights International (MDRI) signed an agreement at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, in Washington, D.C., in which the Government of Paraguay made a commitment to set up community-based mental health services. As part of this plan, Paraguay is undertaking a reform of its mental health services, policies, and national legislation with the assistance of PAHO, WHO, and MDRI. This is the first time that the mechanism of Precautionary Measures has been used by the Commission to protect the life and integrity of persons confined to a psychiatric facility. This action sets an important precedent in international human rights law that can be used in other contexts involving the health of the most vulnerable groups and public health institutions. In *Human Rights Brief* (Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, American University), whose pdf version is attached to this bulletin, MDRI's Director of the Initiative for the Americas describes how MDRI used the American Convention on Human Rights and the Inter-American mechanisms of human rights to promote and protect the rights of people with mental disabilities in Paraguay. This document is available at <http://www.wcl.american.edu/hrbrief/12/123.pdf?rd=1>

Mental Health Policies and Services Modules

The WHO Department of Mental and Substance Abuse (Geneva) has put together a guidance package on Mental Health Policies and Services to assist planners and policymakers in developing strategies to improve the mental health of their populations through a community care model applicable in different development contexts. Thirteen modules are available in English. Some modules include topics such as "Planning and Budgeting to Deliver Services for Mental Health," "Mental Health Financing," and "Quality Improvement for Mental Health," "Advocacy for Mental Health," "Improving Access and Use of Psychotropic Medicines," "Organization of Services for Mental Health," "Child and Adolescent Health Policies and Plans," "Human Resources and Training in Mental Health," "Mental Health Information Systems," and "Mental Health Policies and Programs in the Workplace." The WHO modules can be accessed under "Mental health policy and service guidance package" at:

http://www.who.int/mental_health/policy/en/

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Capacity Building for Identification and Short-term Interventions in Primary Health Care for Problems connected with Alcohol Abuse

Over the past 30 years, research has shown that people who drink to excess but do NOT suffer from any alcohol-related disorder are those who benefit the most from short-term interventions to prevent alcohol abuse or dependency. A large proportion of these individuals are seen in the primary health services each year, and thus, integrating screening with short-term interventions by trained professionals is an efficacious, cost-effective measure in primary health care. Contrary to popular belief, short-term interventions are not the first treatment for dependency, but serve only to refer patients with dependency or dangerous levels of consumption to other health services. The AUDIT questionnaire (Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test) was developed by WHO and is recommended by PAHO. Since 2004, training has been provided on the identification of patients and short-term interventions in different countries--e.g., Cuba, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic. A workshop will be held in Panama next May. These exercises are directed to some 30 health professionals working in primary health care: psychiatrists, general practitioners, nurses, social workers, and psychologists. They are also designed so that those trained can then train other professionals. This year there will be a follow-up to the exercise that was conducted in the Dominican Republic to evaluate its results and identify barriers to its effective implementation.

For further information, contact Mrs. Janis Dawson
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Submission of Articles for the Pan American Journal of Public Health

The *Revista Panamericana de Salud Pública/Pan American Journal of Public Health*, the multilingual monthly publication of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) indexed in *Current Contents* and *Social Sciences Citation Index*, invites mental health experts to submit research or expository articles on the following topics: the epidemiology of mental disorders and risk factors in special

population groups in the Americas; characteristics of services for people with mental health problems; access and equity barriers to these services; ethics; human rights in the context of care of persons with mental illness; addictions and treatment programs; human resources in mental health and their professional training; mental health problems in populations marginalized or victimized during armed conflicts or natural disasters; legal aspects of care for persons with mental and behavioral disorders. The focus should be public mental health, given the nature of the journal. Articles in Spanish, Portuguese, and English will be accepted. The *Journal* can be accessed on the Web at <http://journal.paho.org/>. We will soon have an interactive interface for international discussions of public health and mental health issues.

The AIMS Instrument of WHO

WHO has developed a new instrument for evaluating the status of mental health systems, based on the compilation of information in a particular country or region. The object of obtaining this information is to improve the operation of mental health systems and establish mechanisms to oversee the necessary changes. The information requested by the AIMS instrument should be furnished by a focal point who knows the mental health system in a particular region or country and, moreover, is familiar with the additional information that needs to be obtained. This instrument promises to be a useful tool for the reformulation of national mental health policies, the creation of community mental health services, and getting users and their families involved in promotion, prevention, care, and rehabilitation activities in the field of mental health. In the Americas, the instrument has been used in Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, which are currently in the second phase. Panama and the Dominican Republic are in the first phase of AIMS use. This bulletin contains additional information in English in pdf.

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Conference on Mental Health Research in the Latino Population

The Department of Psychiatry of the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Jersey, USA will be holding a conference from 13 to 15 November 2006 in San Juan, Puerto Rico for mental health researchers studying the Latino population. The theme of this conference will be "Special Topics in Latino Mental Health Research: Including Children, Comorbidity, Medical Disorders, and HIV." The deadline for the submission of abstracts is 1 July 2006. Additional information on the submission of abstracts and the conference, including financing issues, can be accessed at <http://www2.umdnj.edu/crlmhweb/index.htm> . For further information about this conference, contact Dr. Alejandro Interian (interial@umdnj.edu)

Brief Notices about the Unit Team...

Since 15 February, the Regional Program for Disability Prevention and Rehabilitation is based in PAHO's Representation Office in Santiago, Chile, and Dr. Armando Vásquez (Regional Advisor) can be contacted by e-mail at vasqueza@chi.ops-oms.org .

Information on the Mental Health Department of WHO (Geneva) can be found at: www.who.int/mental_health/en/