

A 'global' mental health program or markets for Big Pharma?



The global programme on mental health, 'Grand Challenges in Global Mental Health', needs to explore fully the ethical implications of exporting western psychiatric models worldwide.

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An article in the journal *Nature*¹ highlights a program of research and 'effective interventions' for mental health in low and middle-income (LMI) countries, entitled "Grand Challenges in Global Mental Health." The article states that it is co-ordinated by the US National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) and that priorities for research and interventions have been set by an international panel of experts. It is clearly backed by power and money and many big names appear to support it. What is worrying comes from the assumptions about health and illness that it entails; and that service user groups and community organisations in LMI countries appear not have had any voice in developing it.

Culture and illness

The program is about ways of combating what are called 'mental, neurological and substance-use (MNS) disorders'. Mental illnesses, defined on the classical Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders formula (of schizophrenia,

depression, etc.), are listed with no reference to their lack of validity as 'illnesses' across cultures.

A major assumption underpinning the programme is that mental illness is a result of disturbance of 'molecular and cellular mechanisms' in the brain – an extreme version of an outdated biomedical model. Cultural variations in the experience of 'illness' are referred to, but clearly do not affect the main thrust of the so-called 'challenges to global mental health' that are discussed. What stands out is the lack of any attention to what users of services may think or to what communities where western psychiatric models of health are alien concepts may wish to see for improving their mental health and wellbeing.

Imposing bio-medical psychiatry

Ethan Watters' book *Crazy Like Us*² (reviewed in the previous issue of *Open Mind*) describes how the bio-medical notion of 'mental illness' is spreading across the world. This article in *Nature* indicates how

powerful forces in the West are ensuring this actually happens fast. It means no less than the imposition of bio-medical psychiatry across the world and opening of markets for Big Pharma that would follow. Suppression of indigenous healing systems is the result, and this is already happening. Unfortunately, well meaning people appear to be involved in pursuing this dubious enterprise. But how much better ethically if western aid can actually work within a framework of mental health care that is respectful of cultural diversity, acknowledging that there is much wisdom in non-western countries, that we can learn much from how other cultures handle human problems.

After all, has psychiatry been such a success here to entitle us to export it all over the world? As Watters points out, we all stand to lose if we erase the diversity of different cultural understandings of mental health and illness. That is what is already happening and now 'Global Mental Health' wants to increase the speed.

1 Collins, P and Patel, V (2011) 'Grand challenges in global mental health', *Nature* 475: 27–30

2 Watters, E (2010) *Crazy like us: the globalization of the western mind*. London: Robinson.