Improving Mental Health Education and Research Capacity in Zimbabwe (IMHERZ)

In Africa, mental, neurological and substance disorders have become the second biggest cause of disease burden (Mathers, 2006). The treatment gap is vast, with more than 90% of mentally ill persons in Africa going untreated (Kohn, 2004). The research gap is also vast, with urgent needs for research led from within Africa on ways to improve the prevention and treatment of mental disorders. Urgent action is needed to increase the numbers of doctors and allied professional faculty available as specialists in mental health and also to increase mental health education across disciplines.

Zimbabwe has an established medical school which began taking undergraduates in 1963 and trained its first post-graduates psychiatrists in the late 1980s. In the 1990s the department of psychiatry was thriving. However, the turmoil of the last decade has resulted in many health care professionals leaving Zimbabwe to find work elsewhere. While all areas of health have suffered, mental health is one of the worst affected. Psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, psychologists and rehabilitation specialists are severely depleted. Currently, two psychiatrists, three psychologists and one psychiatric nurse are responsible for running the entire university’s psychiatric department. Three mental health nurses and one psychiatrist are responsible for the care of patients attending the Harare psychiatric hospital in southern Harare with 90 beds and weekly out-patient clinics that attends to more than 200 patients.

King’s Health Partners is part of an international consortium, led by the University of Zimbabwe that has been awarded a Medical Education Partnership Initiative (MEPI). The project called ‘Improving Mental Health Education and Research Capacity in Zimbabwe (IMHERZ) is funded by the US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and by several components of the US National Institutes of Health. IMHERZ is linked to NECTAR, a further MEPI award to Zimbabwe for HIV/AIDS education. Total award value is US $2 million.

The mission of NECTAR and IMHERZ is to support medical education and research capacity development in Zimbabwe. The programs will coordinate to increase the quantity, quality, and retention of graduates with specific skills to address the healthcare needs of the population of Zimbabwe.

The aim of IMHERZ is to increase expertise & retention of UZ-College of Health Sciences psychiatry faculty. To do this, we aim to:

- Strengthen existing undergraduate and post-graduate curriculum through assisting with curriculum review and sharing materials
- Identify mentors and provide mentoring,
- Teach short courses and masterclasses
- Support existing faculty to extend their own teaching skills
- Teach Zimbabwean psychiatric trainees and medical students to be competent educators about mental health
- Establish an exchange program for SLAM registrars and SpRs
- Award IMHERZ mentored fellowships for strong Zimbabwean candidates
- Support new proposal developments to build capacity for mental health nurses, psychologists and allied professionals

Some priorities identified include child mental health, mental health legislation and policy, forensic psychiatry, brief psychological therapies, country-relevant neuropsychiatry, and country-relevant research training, with a shift to a more competency-oriented curriculum to include a broad range of competencies.

Dr Melanie Abas, Principal Investigator for King’s Health Partners said: “We are excited and honoured to have this opportunity to work with the University of Zimbabwe College of Health Sciences (UZCHS) to meet the mental health education and research capacity needs of the country. In doing so we build on long-standing linkages between IoP and UZCHS Department of Psychiatry. Our goal is to help the University break the cycle of declining medical education; foster talent and help the country expand and retain its mental health professionals.” IMHERZ will make use of innovative approaches including provision of a competency-based curriculum in mental health with team-based and problem-based learning methods for undergraduates; research fellowships; mentored training fellowships for post-graduates; and up to date methods of educational evaluation.

Collaborator Dr Amy Iversen added: “As the program is implemented we very much look forward to taking part in contributing to a sustainable, relevant psychiatry curriculum at the leading medical training institution in Zimbabwe. This may include providing visiting lectureships, mentoring local scholars and training one or more PhD students.”
Professor James Hakim, Professor of Medicine at UZCHS and Principal Investigator for IMHERZ said: “The UZCHS is privileged to be awarded this prestigious grant. The award has come at a very opportune time when the University is revamping academic and research activities. The grant will enable us to implement programs to improve undergraduate, postgraduate and faculty training in the areas of clinical management and research capacity, and in general to create a scholarly and inquisitive environment at the institution.”

“We must dramatically transform African medical education to increase the number of qualified care providers available and develop the scientific expertise needed for research and innovation,” said Ambassador Eric Goosby, U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator at the Department of State. “By engaging country health and education ministries, MEPI will strengthen national plans to improve medical instruction and bolster the overall health care delivery systems. This expertise will empower countries to lead health programs and fulfill their responsibility for the health of their people.”

The IMHERZ consortium is a partnership of faculty at UZCHS with faculty from Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, Harvard University, University College London, University of Cape Town and University of Bristol.