

Special Report

FSRI committed to treating anyone, train more local therapists

Mental health care in Kuwait continues to improve

By Cinatra Fernandes
Arab Times Staff

Mental health and well-being is a growing concern and health priority in the world today as it determines greatly an individual's capacity to lead a fulfilling life. Mental well-being can be put at risk by a wide range of factors and can lead to not only diminished functioning at the individual level but also impact the household and community. Millions of people worldwide today have mental health conditions and according to the World Health Organisation, an estimated one in four people globally will experience a mental health condition in their lifetime.

In this interview, Dr Nicholas Scull, Clinical Director and Licensed Psychologist, and Saima Bhatti, Clinical Coordinator and Counselor/Children's Rehab at Fawzia Sultan Rehabilitation Institute, discuss mental health and its treatment in Kuwait, and provide information about the Institute's new International Counseling Psychology program that is geared towards training local professionals in counseling psychology in an effort to increase local capacity.

Arab Times: How far have we come in looking at mental health as an integral part of our overall health in Kuwait?

Nicholas Scull: I think things have certainly improved over the past several years. Not only has mental health care services increased, but it also seems like the quality of care has also improved considerably. I very much hope that at some point, people will see that they need to take care of their mental health care just as they do their physical healthcare.

AT: What are the main determinants of mental health? How is it affected by socio-economic, biological and other factors?

NS: Mental health is typically influenced by an interaction of our biology, psychology, and society.

AT: What mental health conditions are most prevalent here?

NS: It is difficult to say which conditions are most prevalent in Kuwait because little research on this has been done here. However, I can say that the psychologists at FSRI very commonly see people for depression, anxiety, problems with family and relationships, ADHD, trauma, eating disorders, substance use disorders, personal identity issues, and more chronic mental health concerns. Some people also seek therapy because they simply want to know more about themselves.

AT: Who would you identify as vulnerable groups in Kuwaiti society and how can we support them?

NS: Fortunately, Kuwait has a number of good options for mental health care in the public and private sectors. However, I believe that still a large percentage of people in Kuwait are reluctant to seek mental health care when they need it due to stigma and misunderstanding about the process. Due to profound generational difference and the fact that mental health care is relatively new in Kuwait, I suspect the elderly in Kuwait are under-treated and therefore vulnerable. Due to the limited child protective services and child rights laws, children remain a vulnerable population. Lastly, people in lower socioeconomic groups, including a large population of foreign workers, are likely less able to seek mental health care and so they probably have a relatively higher rate of untreated mental health concerns.

AT: Is there a stigma still prevalent in Kuwaiti society? How many people seek out help?

NS: Mental health care is still highly stigmatized in Kuwait. We conducted a qualitative study a couple of years ago and all of the study participants reported that stigma of mental health care has been exacerbated by negative experiences with mental health care providers in Kuwait. This tells us that if we want to decrease stigma in Kuwait, we need to ensure that people are getting the highest quality of care possible. Over-



Dr Nicholas Scull, Clinical Director and Licensed Psychologist



Saima Bhatti, Clinical Coordinator and Counselor/Children's Rehab at FSRI

time, this will help improve people's trust in the efficacy of mental health care and decrease stigma. There are also some new advocacy groups in Kuwait that are doing excellent work including a group called, Taqabal, which conducted a highly successful National Mental Health Awareness Campaign in Kuwait. Improving the quality of mental health care and continued awareness campaigns like Taqabal, will certainly help people better understand the importance of mental health care in Kuwait.

AT: How accessible and affordable is treatment?

NS: One of the amazing things about Kuwait is that people can obtain mental health treatment in the public sector for free and they have some outstanding doctors there. As a nonprofit organization, FSRI is committed to treating anyone who needs services and I am proud to say that we have never denied someone access to treatment at FSRI due to finances. Anyone who wants therapy can come and we'll make it happen. I think we're a pretty special place for that reason.

AT: How would you rate the skills of health workers in Kuwait?

NS: It is difficult to say because no outcomes-based research has been done to evaluate treatment efficacy. Generally, however, about 75% of people improve with therapy alone. These improvements occur relatively quickly, usually within several sessions, and their gains are long-lasting, even enduring years after the therapy has stopped. Two of the most important factors to ensure the success of the therapy is, 1) a trusting relationship between the client and therapist and 2) The client's motivation in therapy. Again, though, we would need to do more mental health care research in Kuwait to see if therapy is equally effective here.

Here's some advice I always give people when they're considering therapy:

1. Before you begin, make sure the therapist is sufficiently qualified in that they have attended accredited graduate programs in psychology, and have the skills, training, and experience with your particular concern.

2. Once you begin, give it a few sessions of therapy and if you're not feeling some improvement, have an open conversation with your therapist to see if any changes need to be made to the treatment plan or the therapist.

3. Don't give-up. If you didn't improve or the therapist wasn't the right match, keep trying until you find someone who can help you. Every therapist has a different style and approach and different therapists are ef-

fective with different people.

AT: Tell us about your new program to develop psychological awareness and mental health education in Kuwait. What are its objectives, what does it entail and how will it be carried out?

Saima Bhatti: FSRI is committed to improving mental health care in Kuwait and we are committed to training more local therapists. Therefore, we have partnered with Lehigh University in the USA, to host a Certificate and Master's program in International Counseling Psychology. The objective of the program is to train local professionals in counseling psychology, thereby increasing local capacity.

The certificate program will comprise of four courses; twelve credit hours focusing on counseling and therapeutic approaches, career intervention, facilitating healthy adjustments and building healthy communities.

For many who want to enter the field of counseling psychology, going abroad for their education is not an option. Moreover, programs abroad do not have an understanding of the local cultural nuances. Therefore, Lehigh professors will come to Kuwait throughout the year to teach intensive courses. The courses will be held on-site for a duration of ten days including two weekends (Fridays, Saturdays and four weeknights Sunday through Wednesday). The benefit of this programmatic structure is that it is flexible enough so that people can complete the program while working and holding other personal responsibilities.

Once people complete the certificate, they can then apply for the master's program. The master's program would require the student to take a few more courses and an intensive 1-year clinical internship. Students would graduate with a master's degree in International Counseling Psychology from Lehigh University.

AT: What are the benchmarks for progress made through this program?

SB: The benchmarks of progress will be the continued interest and participation of the professionals in the program with a commitment to provide quality mental health services in a culturally diverse community. It can be indicative through an increase in the number of trained mental health professionals in private and public sector.

AT: Who are the key stakeholders and partners involved? Will the program engage non-health sectors?

SB: The nice thing about the certificate is that it would benefit people from a broad range of profes-

sional interests including people who are interested in working in counseling settings, schools, social services, health, business, and human resources.

This program is also geared towards corporate sector specifically human resource development of the organizations.

AT: How important are international partnerships and collaborations of this kind?

NS: International partnerships help increase and improve local capacity to provide high quality mental health care in Kuwait. At the same time, such partnerships need to be sensitive to cultural differences.

AT: How far can early childhood interventions and support to children go in the overall promotion of mental health in Kuwait?

NS: Early intervention for childhood disorders is essential. For some disorders, if they are not treated early-on, the opportunity for improvement decreases substantially.

SB: The interventions include parenting strategies and family work which not only is conducive to the prognosis but also is preventive in child's overall development and emotional wellbeing in certain cases.

AT: What can employers do to promote better mental health among employees?

NS: Some of the smarter companies have clearly seen how employees who are happy and healthy are more productive in their jobs. So, companies have invested in various employee assistance programs (EAP's), which includes mental health care, to improve the overall well-being of their employees. They know that the cost of the program will be far exceeded by the gains produced by more productive employees.

AT: In what ways can the current delivery of healthcare services be improved upon to better respond to the needs of patients?

SB: The current health care services here are quite efficient in providing the required medical care. However, some aspects related to the patients wellbeing, for instance communication regarding diagnosis and treatment, plan can be improved for overall better results. In general health care serviced providers can benefit from learning about the patient's emotional factors related to the ailment and respective communication. The interpersonal skills for any health care service provider stands a chance for a stronger alliance with the patient.

AT: What changes or initiatives would you recommend to the country's national mental health policies?

NS: Respectfully, I would recommend that Kuwait's government continue to make improving the mental health care structure a national priority. Here is what I recommend:

1. There is a dire need for mental health regulation. The lack of regulation of mental health care in Kuwait has led to ill-qualified clinicians providing services that they have no training in. Of course, this can cause harm to people and exacerbate the stigma of mental health care. A solution to this problem is to develop local licensing laws.

Many other countries around the world have such licensing laws as this protects the public. Such licensing ensures that clinicians have a minimum level of education and training. Currently, Kuwait has no regulation whatsoever.

2. Increase local capacity for mental health care. Most of the providers of mental health care in Kuwait were trained abroad. We cannot assume that what works in the United States, for example, will also work in Kuwait. Therefore, Kuwait would do well to develop solid master's and doctoral programs in counseling and clinical psychology. This would also help to address the massive shortage of local mental health providers.

3. Expand public mental health services in primary care, schools, and inpatient hospitals. Kuwait would do well to continue to the country's efforts to integrate mental health care into primary care settings. This will help ensure that a larger percentage of people in Kuwait have access to mental health care. The public schools should also have exceptionally well-trained school psychologists who can help identify childhood disorders early-on. With what appears to be a growing problem of substance use in Kuwait, the country would do well to expand its ability to treat substance use disorders in an inpatient capacity.

That being said, it's amazing to see how much mental health care has improved in Kuwait even during just the past several years. I'm proud that FSRI has contributed in measurable ways to this growth. I'm hopeful that this Lehigh program will have a positive impact on the field of mental health care in Kuwait.

Biography

Nicholas Scull
L.C.S.W., PhD
Clinical Director Licensed Psychologist

Dr Nicholas Scull is licensed in the United States, as both a psychologist and clinical social worker. He has many years of clinical ex-

perience working across a range of different institutions and organizations, including the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Swarthmore College, as well as a number public schools and community mental health centers. He has specialized training in providing culturally competent psychotherapy, clinical supervision, and psychoeducational assessment.

Dr Nicholas is a member of the American Psychological Association, and Divisions 17 (Counseling Psychology) & 52 (International Psychology). He currently also holds an academic appointment at the American University of Kuwait as an Assistant Professor of Psychology and serves as the Assistant Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Dr Nicholas was trained and educated in the United States, receiving his Master's degree in Clinical Social Work from Bryn Mawr College, and his Doctorate in Counseling Psychology (with a minor specialization in Educational Psychology) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He also completed an APA-accredited doctoral internship and post-doctoral fellowship at UCLA, holds a professional certificate in Internet Addiction & the Psychology of the Web, and has a certificate in Aging and Mental Health from Boston University.

Saima Bhatti
MS, SEC, MBA, MAP
Clinical Coordinator; Counselor/Children's Rehab

Saima Bhatti provides counselling and guidance at both FSRI and the Children's Evaluation and Rehabilitation Centre (CERC). She works primarily with children and adolescents with learning, academic and behavioral difficulties.

Saima also provides family therapy for children and families facing learning difficulties and emotional behavioral disturbances. Her areas of interest include emotional behavior concerns, anxiety disorders, and early childhood interventions.

Saima has three master's degrees; a Master's in Multidisciplinary studies, including a Special Education certification, from the State University of New York-Buffalo, an MBA from the Imperial College of Business in Pakistan (affiliated with the college in London), and a Master's in Applied Psychology from the University of Punjab. She has also completed a professional certificate in International Counseling Psychology from Lehigh University in the United States, and TEACCH Autism Program training from the University of North Carolina.

News in Brief

Amir congratulates Sri Lanka:

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent a cable Saturday to Sri Lanka's President Maithripala Sirisena, congratulating him on his country's national day.

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables. (KUNA)

KOC eyes mammoth project:

Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) has decided to award bigger contracts to develop and improve oil production at 12 wells and water treatment in Burgan Oil Field, reports Al-Anba daily.

The daily quoting reliable sources added the company has obtained official approval to execute the mammoth project valued at \$675 million, noting three companies will officially sign contracts within the next few weeks for implementation

of the project.

Council cancels tender:

The country's Supreme Petroleum Council on Thursday cancelled the tender for the new refinery feed pipeline contract in Al-Zour.

The tender by Kuwait Oil Company (KOC), the state's upstream operator, aimed to connect the South Tank Farm to the New Refinery at Al-Zour.

The Council took a unanimous decision to cancel the tender after all points of view were heard and alternatives discussed, said Essam Al-Marzouq, minister of oil and minister of electricity and water in a press release following the Council meeting.

The minister added that the Council was briefed with the oil sector's plan to sustain operation at Al-Zour (Al-Liqaim) Refinery through current pipelines with South Al-Zour Refinery and Al-Ahmedi Refinery.

'Embodiment of strong friendship between 2 nations'

KFAED loans, grants to Sudan exceed \$1 bln

SETIT, Sudan, Feb 4, (KUNA): The loans and grants offered by the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) to Sudan have totaled KD 306 million (over \$ one billion). KFAED official has stated.

"What have been offered and what will be offered by KFAED to Sudan, is an embodiment of the strong friendship between the two nations," KFAED Deputy Director General Hamad Al-Omar told KUNA Friday.

He pointed out that the first KFAED loan to Sudan dates back to 1962 and was used to finance a railway project.

Al-Omar made these remarks to KUNA after participating on Thursday in a ceremony for signaling the operation of the first turbine of the power generation station at the Upper Atbara-Setit Complex at Al-Gaddarif for its finance, the KFAED has provided a KD 50 million (\$168 million) loan.

"Despite the global economic crisis, KFAED is doing its utmost, with the help of God and directives of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, to maintain its ability to deliver its mission related to cooperation with 106 countries around the world," he said.

He noted that the Upper Atbara-Setit Complex aims to support the development of Eastern Sudan, through enhancement of agriculture production, generation of hydropower and provision of potable water to the city of Port Sudan and its suburbs at the Red Sea District and the city of Al-Gaddarif.

For his part, Kuwait Ambassador to Sudan Bas-sam Al-Qabandi lauded KFAED's contributions to the mega development projects in Sudan in the past 55 years.

He pointed out that Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir has expressed appreciation of the KFAED's crucial role in development in Sudan.

He stated that Kuwait was the first backer of development in his country and KFAED first's loan to a foreign country was offered to Sudan.

The complex would lead to a quantum leap in the services in Eastern Sudan Province, develop agriculture sector and provide electricity and potable water, the president clarified.

The Upper Atbara-Setit Complex project includes the construction works and provision of equipment for a Dam complex comprising Rumela Dam at Upper Atbara River and Burdana Dam at Setit River.

The project site is located 20 KM upstream the joining of the rivers and about 80 KM south of the Khashm Al-Qurba Dam. The Dam complex will have a joined reservoir with a storage capacity of about 3.7 billion cubic meter of water.

It includes the construction of hydropower station on Rumela Dam with an installed capacity of 320 MW capable of producing 843 GWH per year and the civil work for another hydropower station on Burdana Dam with a provision capacity of 15 MW, in addition to the rehabilitation of 15 MW at the existing Khashm Al-Qurba Damcapable of producing 41 GWH per year.

It includes the construction of a new water intake at the right bank to irrigate by gravity Eastern Agricultural lands downstream of the dam in Kasala District. As well as construction a hydropower station at the intake with an installed capacity of 17 MW capable of producing 72 GWH per year in addition to the rehabilitation of irrigation infrastructure in New Halfa area of about 190 thousand hectare.

The project also includes the development of new agriculture areas in the eastern bank of Upper Atbara River in Kassala State.