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# Alliance to improve moms' mental health

Cape Times 21 Jun 2018 Lisa Isaacs

A GROUP of organisations and individuals working together to improve the mental health of mothers in Africa has launched the African Alliance for Maternal Mental Health (AAMMH) in Malawi.

Across Africa, millions of women experience challenges with their mental health in pregnancy and the postnatal period.

They include gender-based violence, economic and gender inequalities, physical illnesses such as HIV, complications of childbirth, and the stresses of child care.

Specific mental health problems that affect mothers include depression, anxiety and post-partum psychosis.

The alliance calls for multi-level action to tackle the causes of poor maternal mental health.

The Perinatal Mental Health Project (PMHP) at UCT is a founding partner of the AAMMH.

Together with the leadership in Malawi, PMHP co-designed the launch to include training workshops and collaboration-planning workshops for developing services and research

projects.

Health officials of Malawi's Ministry of Health and maternal mental health advocates from across the continent were at the launch this week.

PMHP director Dr Simone Honikman said maternal mental illnesses were highly prevalent in Africa, yet largely neglected by policymakers, ministries of health and programme leadership.

“The emerging wave of maternal mental health researchers are paving the way for this to change.

“These researchers are engaging with key governmental stakeholders in the design phase of their research and are building in knowledge translation and uptake strategies to ensure implementation,” Honikman said.

AAMMH aims to educate care providers and the wider community about the importance of the mental health of mothers, and the recognition, prevention and treatment of maternal mental health problems; and to advocate for maternal mental health to be prioritised in the strategies, policies and budgets of governments and NGOs, and in the teaching and research agendas of educational institutions.

Honikman said recent research

had shown 20% of mothers in developing countries experienced some form of mental health problems during or after childbirth.

Even though there was no research on prevalence of maternal mental health problems across the continent, in South Africa the rate of pregnant and postnatal mothers suffering from common mental disorders (depression and/or anxiety) could reach up to one in three, she said.

Many of these mothers were poor, came from disadvantaged communities and faced obstacles in accessing services and care.

Health-care systems in most African countries are not

equipped to deal with the complex health and social challenges faced by most mothers, and with competing physical health priorities and constrained resources, mental health care remained seriously neglected, said Honikman.



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