

Mental healthcare sector cries for funds

BANGALORE: With a serious shortfall in funding for the treatment of mental illnesses in the country, an expert has called for an increase in the health budget.

Dr Shekhar Saxena, director of the department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, World Health Organisation (WHO), said India currently spent only three per cent of the total health budget to treat mental illnesses, while many developing countries allocate more than 13 per cent for the purpose.

Speaking at the inauguration of the Centre for Public Health and a symposium on 'public health priorities in mental, neurological and substance abuse (MNS) disorders and injuries' on Tuesday, Saxena said the burden of mental disease was higher in developing countries than in developed coun-

tries. "The priority now will be to set up more designated centres at public health centres in collaboration with the WHO to cater to the mental health challenges in society and the country at large," he said.

According to statistics compiled by the WHO, one in four people worldwide suffer from mental health issues, including those stemming from neurological and substance abuse. The numbers are significantly larger than sufferers of any other common disease in the world. Saxena said cases of depression among women between the age of 15 and 44 were more than maternal deaths, which normally receive greater attention.

"Some 62 per cent of psychiatric beds in the world are still located in mental hospitals, which stigmatises the patient rather than having a commu-



nity approach to treat mental health problems," Saxena said and added that there was a severe shortage of psychiatrists, psychologists, neurologists and nurses to treat the growing number of mental health patients.

Sujaya Krishnan, joint secretary to the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, said as Nimhans had established a centre for public health, the institute had a large

role to play in addressing mental health issues.

"We are expecting a three-fold increase in the budgetary allocation for the health sector in 12th Five Year Plan," she said.

Dr G Gururaj, professor and head of Epidemiology, who would be heading the new centre for public health, said it would focus on the neglected mental health issues. "Nimhans is planning to take up one district (as yet undecided) for their pilot project to study mental health issues. The approach of the programme will be different from the National Mental Health Programme," he said.

Gururaj said Nimhans would also introduce a two-year MPH (Master of Public Health) course to empower the mental health programme.

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