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Mental health care in Afghanistan: The need of the hour

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The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously devastated the national, regional, and international health-care systems and thus opened some new windows for health-related issues and challenges. Afghanistan was one of the most affected countries during the COVID-19 crisis. Afghanistan is a landlocked country situated at the crossroads of Central and South Asia. In 2021, the country's population was over 40 million. The Afghan people suffered badly as a result of the United States' longest war. The United States military service members left Afghanistan on August 30, 2021 ^[1], declaring the end of the United States invasion of two decades. As a result of the United States war, the poor healthcare system and humanitarian crisis have significantly affected the mental health of Afghan people. Mental health has remained a significant and often discussed issue over the years.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic, political instability, and the current earthquake have doubled the intensity of mental health issues in Afghanistan. Afghans suffering from mental illnesses seek treatment despite personal, cultural, and institutional barriers such as poverty, social marginalization, humiliation, gender discrimination, and ongoing violence ^[2]. The mental health of adolescents has been damaged by the ongoing violence in Afghanistan. In a sample of 1011 Afghan adolescents, 224 (22.2%) had emotional problems, 49 (4.9%) had behavioral issues, and 242 (23.9%) had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In Afghanistan, being younger was a risk factor for having poor mental health ^[3]. Depression and anxiety disorders are relatively common, particularly among women and children. Gender segregation (known as "purdah") in Afghanistan, sexual abuse against women, and war-related traumatic losses are all key risk factors for the development of depression and anxiety disorders in women. Exposure to war-related violence is thought to induce a high rate

of physical handicap among men, which has a significant impact on their mental health ^[4]. East Afghanistan's only mental health clinic serves millions of people. There are only five community-level clinics for mental health in Kabul and Shebargan. Afghanistan has 20 psychologists, 18 psychiatric nurses, and 8 psychiatrists. Although these numbers are low for a nation of 40 million, the actual situation is much worse because the majority of mental health specialists have left the country. Few Afghans receive treatment for mental illness ^[4].

Most importantly, efforts must be made at a national or regional level to overcome barriers to accessing mental health care in Afghanistan. The mobile clinic, which is financed by USAID and WHO, administers important immunizations to children. Through outreach and education, the mobile health team improved the community's perspective on vaccines. After learning about the advantages of vaccinations, nearly all families vaccinate their children regularly ^[5]. There is a dire need for increased funding for mental health and to establish mobile mental health care facilities across the country on an urgent basis. International funding agencies, organizations, and governments should cooperate with the Afghan government to overcome this humanitarian crisis.

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