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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Creating a Space for Clinical Psychologists in Healthcare System in Ghana: Is it Necessary?

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Abstract

The relevance of the clinical psychologists in the health sector cannot be underestimated. It is now recognized that psychological issues play a crucial role in almost every health care condition, and that addressing these issues will increase well-being and quality of life. One important role is the prevention of diseases, through behavior medicine (Ogden, 2000); whereby people can be helped to behave in healthier ways, given that many illnesses or disabilities could be prevented. However, there is a misconception among Ghanaians that clinical psychologists are only meant for the mental hospitals which is due to ignorance about what exactly the field is about. This paper argues that Clinical psychologists can do more in providing healthcare services to Ghanaians beyond mental health services and also makes recommendations concerning the training and placement of Clinical psychologists in Ghana.

Keywords: Clinical Psychologists; Healthcare System; Mental Health; Behavior Medicine; Ghana.

Early Days of Clinical Psychology on the World Scene

From the beginning of history, even before Psychology became a field, there were people with relationship problems, depression and questions about vocational choices or about problem children, and these people sought out individuals they believed had the ability to help them (Sokal, 2001). This suggests that even before Psychology became a science, people practiced “some form of psychology”, thus providing some relief for psychologically distressed individuals, but under several different labels, such as phrenologist, physiognomist, graphologist, mesmerist, spiritualist, psychic, mental healer, seer and many more (Benjamin Jr., 2005) who are known today as “paraprofessionals”.

The problem however was that no laws existed at that time to regulate the practice of these people, no professional standards to regulate the training of these individuals and to ensure competence, no laws to even protect the public from fraudulent practices. Everybody did what they liked. The field of Psychology on the contrary is governed by rules and regulations. There are standards of practice which also include regulation of training and professional ethics to ensure competence and the protection of the public. Psychology is also driven by research, thus

psychologists conduct systematic research and findings from these researches are used to help people suffering from various psychological problems.

Initially, psychologists were not interested in abnormal behavior; their main interest was in the assessment of intelligence and later personality (Benjamin Jr., 2005). They therefore developed several psychological tests which they used. It was Lightner Witmer who was adventurous enough to venture into the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of abnormality in 1896 when he established his “Psychological Clinic”, where he treated children with learning disabilities and behavior problems and in 1907, published his first journal in which he published his case studies from his clinic. It was in this journal that he coined the term “Clinical Psychology” which marked the beginning of the field of clinical psychology; a subfield of psychology.

The growth of clinical psychology can be traced to the first and second world wars in which clinical psychologists were engaged in treating “shell shock” or Post traumatic Stress disorder victims at army hospitals. More clinical psychologists were trained after the Second World War through funding by the Federal government of the United States at that time in order to attend to the veterans who had returned from war with many psychological disorders. This also saw an increase in the number of researches done in the field (Benjamin Jr., 2005). Today, the field of clinical psychology has grown so much that it also has other subfields, examples include; clinical health psychology, clinical neuropsychology, forensic psychology, clinical child psychology, among others.

Roles of Clinical Psychologists in Healthcare

Clinical psychologists are psychologists that assess, diagnose, predict, prevent, and treat psychopathology, mental disorders, and other individual or group problems to improve behavior, adjustment, adaptation, personal effectiveness, and satisfaction (Benjamin Jr., 2005). Clinical psychologists also do research and teach in schools.

The relevance of the clinical psychologists in the health sector cannot be underestimated. Doctors often express surprise at the behaviour of their patients. They ask, ‘why do they continue to smoke even when they know the risks?’, ‘why do patients come to see me when nothing is really wrong?’, ‘why do patients not come to see me when something is seriously wrong?’ and ‘why are people so different in the ways they manage the stress in their lives and respond to illness (Ogden, 2000)? These questions can easily be answered by the clinical psychologist [more specifically, clinical health psychologist.

The relevance of clinical psychologists in health care is further highlighted by the fact that, it is now recognized that psychological issues play a crucial role in almost every health care condition, and that addressing these issues will increase well-being and quality of life (Llewelyn & Kennedy, 2003). Eight out of ten of the top causes of death have psychosocial components in their etiology and/or maintenance. Forty-five per cent of all causes of death are cardiovascular in nature (which is often stress-related). Sixteen out of twenty of the most frequently diagnosed conditions in primary care have some behavioral component which could be amenable to intervention by clinical psychologists. Approximately three million people world-wide die each year from a tobacco-related disease. Also, the growing diseases of civilization [cancer, coronary heart disease, stroke etc.] are mediated by social isolation, obesity and substance abuse. Chronic conditions are the main focus of health care (Llewelyn, & Kennedy, 2003). All these suggest that psychological issues must play an increasingly central role in the provision of healthcare in all types of settings, from primary care to specialist centres. Clinical psychologists are therefore needed to help increase the range of treatments offered to patients.

The Need for Clinical Psychologists in Ghana’s Healthcare System

Here in Ghana, there is this misconception that clinical psychologists are only meant for the mental hospitals which is due to ignorance about what exactly the field is about. Clinical psychologists can play very vital roles in general medicine [thus, in the general hospitals] as well. One important role is the prevention of diseases, through behavior medicine (Ogden, 2000); whereby people can be helped to behave in healthier ways, given that many illnesses or disabilities could be prevented. Secondly, a lot of people who visit hospitals do not actually need medical care. Some just fake illness in order to escape responsibility [malingerers] and some are suffering from a condition known as “factitious disorder” whereby a person induces symptoms of illnesses just to

assume the “sick role” (APA, 2000) in order to get attention from health practitioners. All these people put unnecessary pressure on the health facilities. If clinical psychologists are employed, they can identify such people and separate them from those who really need medical care.

Another group of people who use health facilities regularly are people suffering from chronic and terminal illness such as sickle cell anemia, diabetes, cancer, HIV/AIDS etc. Apart from the medical conditions, these people have psychological problems that come with their conditions such as depression, anxiety and suicide tendencies and these psychological needs could be met by the clinical psychologist. Aside the psychological needs, these people need to live with the consequences of their illnesses and the clinical psychologist can help them manage these consequences by helping them with pain management and coping skills training so as to increase their functional abilities and to develop a wide range of methods of ensuring social and vocational engagement and support for them. This would go a long way to improve their quality of life considerably.

It has also been established that certain medical conditions are mediated by psychological factors, for instance; Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Dysmenorrhea, Obesity, headaches, bruxism, cancer among others, in that psychological factors influence the onset, course, severity, frequency or interfere with the treatment of such conditions (APA, 2000). These conditions would therefore be successfully treated only if both medical and psychological treatments are used, and the clinical psychologist cannot be left out in this case. Other roles clinical psychologists can play in general medical care include; Pre and post surgery counseling, Pre and post natal counseling, Care for the elderly and terminally-ill, Stress management and the prevention and adjunct treatment of lifestyle diseases such as hypertension , cardiovascular diseases etc.

Further, concerning the area in which clinical psychology is traditionally known for, “mental health”, the role of clinical psychologists is enormous. One thing to note however is that while the psychiatrists focus on the use of medication to treat mental illness, (though they also have some training in psychotherapy, they hardly have time to do psychotherapy due to the overwhelming number of patients they need to attend to), the clinical psychologists on the other hand focus on the use of psychotherapy even though some of them have the necessary training to prescribe drugs, they do this only when it becomes very necessary. One good thing about psychotherapy is that, it has no known adverse side effect as the psychotropic drugs do, unless it is performed by unqualified persons. Also, evidence-based psychotherapies such as CBT are as effective as available medication in the short term and more effective than drugs in preventing relapse (British Psychological Society, 2009).

With the enactment of the mental health act into law, which seeks to promote an interdisciplinary approach to mental health, the clinical psychologist cannot be left out. To add to that, research has revealed that about 40% of all people attending health clinics have some kind of mental illness and 4 of the top 10 most disabling conditions in the world are mental illnesses (Crabb, & Razi, 2007). Also depression has been shown to cause the most disability of all illnesses. It even causes more disability than malaria. And most mental illnesses can be treated in simple, cheap ways and most people with mental illnesses can be stabilized (Crabb, & Razi, 2007). Mental health issues are therefore very important in healthcare and psychiatrists cannot do it all alone. There is a need for a multimodal approach to the treatment and care of the mentally ill.

Clinical psychologists can help in the treatment and management of all mental illnesses, ranging from depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, schizophrenia to somatoform and dissociative disorders, substance related disorders etc. Presently, one problem that seems to be on the increase in Ghana is defilement. The perpetrators of such acts [paedophiles] apart from imprisonment need psychological treatment because they may not be mentally fit (APA, 2000), else when they get out of jail, they might repeat the same act. What about the victims themselves, what psychological intervention is given to them, considering the trauma associated with sexual assault? These people can be treated by clinical psychologists. Other roles clinical psychologists can play in mental health are; adjunct treatment for schizophrenia patients, such as skills training in daily living activities, psycho-education, coping and management of the disorder, treatment of children with psychological problems [Autism, ADHD, Learning disabilities etc.], treatment of adjustment problems, stress-related disorders such as, Acute and Post traumatic Stress Disorders, treatment of victims of rape and sexual assault as well as marital and family interventions for distressed families and couples.

In addition, clinical psychologists, specifically clinical neuropsychologists can also provide neuropsychological care for patients. These include Assessment of brain damage, rehabilitation after brain injury, stroke or neurosurgery, treatment of cognitive deficits resulting from cerebrovascular diseases, adjunct treatment for epilepsy and sickle cell disorders, cerebral malaria and HIV patients (since these conditions are found to result in cognitive deficits), treatment of learning, reading, memory disabilities and other neurological problems in children (Katz, Ashley, O'Shanick, & Connors, 2006; Nazemi, & Butler, 2010; Sarfo, 2014).

Presently in Ghana, the role of clinical psychologists under ministry of health is very shallow. The focus is mainly on institutional care. Clinical psychologists can do more, in terms of community care, such as organizing intervention programs for victims of suicide, natural disasters etc., preventive programs for the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy and substance abuse, identification, diagnosis and treatment of psychologically distressed people in the community, intervention/treatment of marital and family problems, including domestic violence (Sarfo, 2014).

Challenges

Currently there are no regulatory systems in place to streamline the activities of Psychologists in Ghana. The part five of Act 857 passed in 2012, which seeks to put structures in place to monitor and regulate the training and practice of psychology in Ghana is yet to see its full implementation. This therefore gives room for quackery and the provision of substandard services to unsuspecting clients.

In addition, the current number of trained clinical psychologists is woefully inadequate to cater for the numerous health needs of the Ghanaian populace. Moreover, there is no regularized system in place to employ clinical psychologists into the health system as soon as they complete their training. Due to this, many end up diverting into other fields leaving a void in the health system.

Conclusions

In a developing country such as Ghana, there is an increasing demand for healthcare services as a result of the many stressors brought about by economic and other social challenges. There is a need for a holistic approach to healthcare by bringing on board all the necessary team players in the area of health, including clinical psychologists. As the saying goes, "A healthy mind lives in a healthy body", the body and the mind cannot be separated from each other. They influence each other in diverse ways. It is therefore necessary to emphasize that, psychological and rehabilitative issues are just as important to healthcare as medical and pharmacological intervention (Llewelyn, & Kennedy, 2003).

Recommendations

To ensure that clinical psychologists provide the needed healthcare services, there is a need to regulate the content of their training so as to ensure that every trained clinical psychologist in Ghana has the required competence to deliver quality healthcare services to citizens.

Secondly, there is a need for a close partnership between training institutions and Ghana Health Service/Ministry of Health in order to put systems in place to employ clinical psychologists after their training.

Further, structures need to be put in place to enable the newly inaugurated Ghana Psychological Council perform its mandate of regulating activities of Psychologists to ensure that quality health care is provided by them in order to maintain credibility and integrity of the profession.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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