TOPIC: PATHWAYS TO CARE AND DURATION OF UNTREATED MENTAL ILLNESS BEFORE SEEKING MODERN MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND FACTORS ASSOCIATED AMONG INDIVIDUALS WITH MENTAL ILLNESS IN SOUTHWESTERN UGANDA

ABSTRACT

Background: Mental disorders contribute significantly to global burden of disease and all years lived with disability in low and middle income countries (LMICs). Despite the high burden, only a small percentage of people with mental disorders receive modern treatment and most of the untreated cases are found in developing countries. Yet lack of care and late presentation for modern mental health care predisposes to chronicity, premature mortality and increases care burden to the family. The current study aimed to assess the duration of untreated mental illness before seeking modern mental health care and associated factors among individuals with mental illness in southwestern Uganda.

Methods

A cross-sectional study was conducted among people with mental illness who were

accesing care at the psychiatry unit at Mbarara Regional Referral Hospital (MRRH).

Data collection tools were designed to capture the required information from the study participants including sociodemographic characteristics, religiosity, internalized stigma for mental illness, social support and pathways to care. Data was analysed using stata version 17. Continuous variables were summarized using means, median and standard deviations while categorical variables were summarized using proportions and percentages. The Gaussian assumption was used to assess for normality based on the Shapiro–Wilks's test and histograms. Bivariate and multivariable linear regression models were run to assess for the factors associated with duration taken before seeking modern mental health services among the study participants.

Results : A total of 465 participants were enrolled of whom 238 (51.18%) were women. The mean age was 38.95 (SD± 12.84) years. The overall median duration of untreated mental illness before seeking modern mental health care was 8 weeks with an interquartile range of 2-46 weeks. Majority of the study participants, 236 (50.75%) sought help from religious healers during the first episode while about a quarter of the study participants, 124 (26.67%) sought help directly from a mental health professional. However, in the second and subsequent episodes, majority of the study participants sought care from a mental health professional. Factors that were statistically significantly associated with the duration of untreated mental illness before seeking modern mental health care were being married (β=-14.8, 95% CI: 0.78 - 28.84; p=0.04), intrinsic religiosity (β= -2.29, 95% CI 0.56- 4.0; p=0.009), internalized stigma (stereotype endorsement (β =2.39, 95% CI: 0.45 - 4.33; p= 0.02), and social withdrawal (β=2.56; 95% CI: -4.56 - -0.57, p=0.01))

Conclusion: Patients with mental illness in southwestern Uganda have a long duration of untreated mental illness (8weeks) before seeking modern mental health care. The duration is longer among patients who visited traditional healers first (47 weeks) in their pathway to care. Being married, intrinsic religiosity and internalized stigma of mental illness are associated with the duration of untreated mental illness before seeking modern mental health care. We recommend mental health awareness campaigns in southwestern Uganda to enhance community awareness about mental health, and behavior change geared towards timely seeking of modern mental health care.