

16 September 2019 – The World Health Organization (WHO), in partnership with the Ministry of Health, conducted a workshop on WHO Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGap) for health workers in primary health care centres in Al-Anbar governorate, west Iraq.

The workshop, held from 28 July to 1 August 2019, saw 27 paramedics trained to address mental health issues in the governorate.

“The significant shortage in the number of psychiatrists and mental health providers in Iraq has to be urgently addressed given the increasing needs for mental health services resulting from the social stigma in conflict-affected areas,” said acting WHO Representative in Iraq Dr Adham Ismail.

“This workshop is organized in line with WHO-Ministry of Health Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework to raise the level of mental health services provided by non-specialist health workers in primary health care facilities all over Iraq,” Dr Adham added.

The humanitarian crises in Iraq in 2014–2018 has increased the number of people with mental health conditions, which necessitates planning for sustained community and evidence-based mental health services for people with mental health problems of all ages, including marginalized groups such as refugees. Basic clinical mental health care should be available at every healthcare facility.

WHO mhGAP is designed to train the non-specialized health care professionals to provide mental health services to the most common and severe mental disorders in primary health care centres, especially family practice clinics.

This programme also aims to change the misconceptions of mental health workers, in addition to developing their skills in listening to and communicating with people and how to identify psychological problems in the various cases that they manage, stressing the importance of their role in helping raise the level of community awareness about the importance of mental health.

Mental Health Counsellor in the Ministry of Health Dr Imad Abdul Razzaq Abdul Ghani revealed that there are only 2 psychiatrists working in Al-Anbar, and this number is insufficient to accommodate the growing psychological conditions in the province because of the conflicts.

“The Ministry, in cooperation with WHO, is working on raising awareness on mental health and causes of addiction and suicide,” said Dr Imad. “It is important also to consider inclusion of the practical part of the training alongside the theoretical model,” he added.

Rana Mohamed Ali, WHO technical officer says that “we aim to have non-specialized health care professional at each primary health care centre in Iraq; these trained staff will receive supervision by WHO-trained technical supervisors.

The trainee Hiba Adel, a non-specialist health care provider at Falluja General Hospital in Al-Anbar province, praised the level of the scientific material provided during the training course.

Hiba added "This training raises our level of responsibility to receive more cases and different therapeutic levels. Now I have good knowledge and skills to deal with many of the psychological cases that we did not follow-up previously, such as depression and psychoses.

The WHO Mental Health Gap (mhGap) Intervention Guide is an evidence-based protocol which promotes a biopsychosocial model that ensures the availability and good quality of psychosocial services in all health centres.

Since October 2018, WHO has been building the capacities of non-specialized health professionals in Iraq through conducting 10 training courses on mhGAP Intervention Guide. The training took place in Erbil, Dohuk, Sulaymaniyah, Basra, and Baghdad, for about 250 general practioners,, family medicine doctors and nurses working at primary health care centres in the camps and family medicine centres. The trainees were from Dohuk, Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salah-Alden, Anbar, Basra, Sulaymania and Erbil.

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