

Opinion

Investments in mental health for far-reaching benefits

By Dr Bjorn Lomborg

MENTAL health problems are a major contributor to the disease burden across the world and in Ghana. They have a significant impact on

individuals through increased disability and mortality but they also generate substantial costs for Ghana and elsewhere in the form of lost productivity.

The cost of poor mental health has been conservatively estimated to account for between three per cent and four per cent of GDP in developing countries.

Globally, the World Economic Forum and the Harvard School of Public Health have estimated the cost of mental illness at US\$2.5 trillion every year, with a projected increase to US\$6 trillion by 2030.

At an individual level, both patients and their caregivers experience economic costs due to mental health issues. Depression, for example, causes a 50 per cent productivity loss for the patient and 24 per cent for the caregiver. With schizophrenia, the loss in productivity is estimated at 70 per cent for the patient and 30 per cent for the caregiver.

According to World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates, approximately 13 per cent of Ghana's population suffers from mental disorders, with schizophrenia, substance abuse and mood disorders being the most common diagnoses.

Mental disorders are one of the leading causes of years lived with disability in the country and it has been predicted that there will be an increase in the number of young people entering the age of risk for onset of certain mental disorders.

Despite the prevalence and impact of these diseases, mental and neurological disorders often go undiagnosed and untreated, and investment in mental health is less than one per cent of the health budget in many

countries.

In Ghana, the treatment gap for mental health disorders is estimated to be over 90 per cent. Many people do not receive evidence-based care, which leads to chronicity, suffering and increased economic effects.

Better mental health

Encouraging better mental health through increased screening, early detection and intervention for severe mental disorders, particularly depression and schizophrenia, has the potential to reduce the high social and economic effects for both individuals and the society.

However, with so many areas competing for the attention of policymakers, it is vital to know where scarce public resources can generate the biggest benefit not only in economic but also social and environmental terms.

This is the goal of Ghana Priorities, a collaboration between the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) and think tank Copenhagen Consensus that aims to find the most cost-effective policies to improve the lives of all Ghanaians.

With the support of numerous ministries, sector experts and stakeholders across all levels of government and society, the researchers have analysed more than 80 policy proposals to determine where public resources would do the most good for every cedi spent.

On mental health, Justice Nonvignon and Samuel Agyei Agyemang from the School of Public Health at the University of Ghana, Caroline Reindorf Amisshah from the Mental Health Authority (MHA) in Accra and Brad Wong from Copenhagen Consensus calculated the costs of screening approximately 980,000 people to detect cases of depression, anxiety and schizophrenia, as well as the cost of their treatment, including both medical and non-medical expenses.

These costs were then compared to the benefits derived from correctly treating mental disorders.

Depression

With depression, the number of Ghanaians projected to be included in the programme after screening was estimated at 13,200.

Treatment would last two years on average, but 30 per cent of the cases would

continue to receive some consultation and medication for life. The total cost of this intervention was estimated at approximately GH¢492 million for a period of 10 years, but the benefit for Ghana and especially its economy would be much larger.

Through screening and treatment, 112 cases of self-harm and twelve suicides could be prevented each year. The total benefits, including around GH¢560 million productivity loss avoided for patients and caregivers, were estimated at GH¢630 million, seven times more than the original investment.

For every cedi spent on treating anxiety, nearly GH¢5 could be gained for society.

Anxiety disorder

For anxiety disorder, the number of Ghanaians projected to receive treatment was estimated at around 11,400, and about 30 per cent would remain on

antidepressants for life. The researchers estimated the total cost of this programme at approximately GH¢88 million, with benefits worth more than GH¢400 million.

Ninety-seven cases of self-harm and nine suicides could be averted every year, as well as an estimated GH¢350 million in productivity loss for patients and caregivers. For every cedi spent on treating anxiety, nearly GH¢5 could be gained for society.

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia patients would be enrolled in treatment for life, but the number of people the researchers estimated to receive treatment in Ghana is only 667, much lower than the number of patients with depression and anxiety.

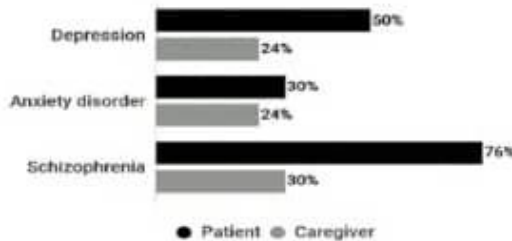
The projected cost for the schizophrenia programme was estimated at approximately GH¢28 million and the total benefit at GH¢44 million, including patient and caregiver productivity loss as well as five cases of self-harm and one suicide averted per year.

Overall, this research shows that screening and treatment for mental disorders in Ghana contributes to improved health and productivity in patients and caregivers, paving the path toward stronger economic participation and output for both within Ghana's economy.

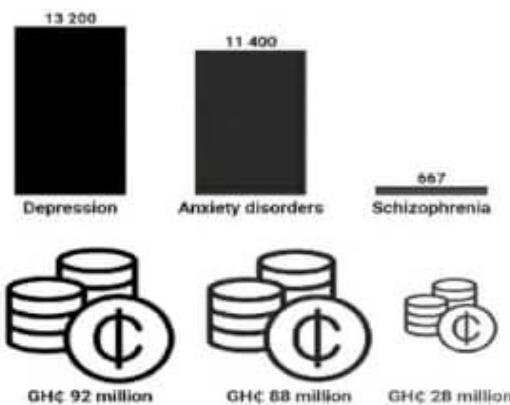
The writer is the President of the Copenhagen Consensus & Visiting Professor at Copenhagen Business School.

Improving mental health

Average loss of productivity for patient and caregiver



Number of patients out of 978,800 screened, and total cost of screening and treatment over 10 years



Social and economic benefits for each Cedi spent



Source: Authors' paper assuming 8% discount rate