

Message from Issue Editor



“Elderly Mental Health”

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As a result of declining fertility and increasing longevity, the populations of a growing number of countries, such as China, India and the United States, are ageing rapidly. Between 2005 and 2050, half of the increase in the world population will be accounted for by a rise in the population aged 60 years or over. Furthermore, in some regions, the population aged 60 or over is expected to nearly double (United Nations, 2006).

Hong Kong has also experienced a similar population explosion in the over-65 age group. Hong Kong has a population of about 7 million, of which 12.5 per cent are aged 65 and over. It is projected that the proportion of elderly population will rise to 27.0 per cent in 2033. The life expectancy at birth in Hong Kong is 78.6 years and 84.3 years for males and females respectively, and is projected to rise to 82.5 years for males, and 88 years for females by 2033 (Census and Statistics Department, 2007).

The theme of this issue ‘Elderly mental health’ is thus timely and important. Mental health problem is a significant contributing factor to the disease burdens of the older adults. The types of mental health problems in older age can be diverse, ranging across depression and anxiety, delirium, dementia, schizophrenia, and alcohol and drug misuse. It is estimated that in Hong Kong, about 5% (40,000) of the elderly population suffer from depression (Chan et al., 2009). A study found that the prevalence of mild dementia is 8.9% (Lam et al., 2008).

Older adults are often the underserved population in need of supportive and tertiary mental health care. For them, there are some roadblocks to mental health services, such as ageism, myths, and stigma. Aging is often viewed as disdained and dislike. Some people equated growing old with growing sad, disengaged, and inactive. Such myths often inhibit older adults from seeking treatment

for feelings and behaviors that they believe are a normal part of life. Stigma associated with mental illness remains very real to older adult. They rarely seek mental health services for fear of being labeled ‘crazy’ and being institutionalised. To promote positive ageing, the many stereotypes and misconceptions about ageing need to be addressed through information and education and recognition of the diversity of older adults.

The papers in this issue address mental health of older adults from various perspectives. Lam and colleagues’ paper provides a comprehensive overview of the origin, history of development and challenges of local psychogeriatric services and discusses practice and policy issues. There is an urgent need for a government mental health policy for older adults to improve the long term planning and the co-ordination among medical and social sectors, and other relevant services. Epidemiological data on mental disorders of older adults in Hong Kong are required for future service planning and allocation of resources.

An individual ages biologically, psychologically, sociologically, and spiritually as a unitary being. Two papers in this issue address the all too often neglected topics in the well-being of older adults: sexuality and spirituality.

Yau’s paper aims to dispel the myths and clarify the misunderstanding surrounding sexuality and ageing through empirical evidences. This paper challenges the ignorance and hesitation from health care professionals related to clients’ sexual concerns create barriers for older adults to continue intimate relationships, and to live a fulfilling sexual and satisfying life.

Lau and Chan’s paper analyses the concept of spiritual health and spiritual illness and provides recommendations for enhancing spiritual well-being. Spiritual well-being may be

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as important as physical capacity in influencing positive ageing. Awareness of the spiritual process in relationship to positive aging may offer a balanced perspective on life issues.

Chronic physical conditions are often associated with depression. Chow and Chou present a study which investigated the relative contribution of pain, sleep disturbance, functional impairment, and restricted social activity to the depression in a sample of older adults with osteoarthritis of the knee. This paper reminds us again the holistic concept of health, in which the physical and psychosocial elements are inseparable.

Taking care of an older adult with mental health problem is often time consuming, stressful and physically and emotionally challenging for family members. There is a need to support these family members. Chien and Chan’s paper reports a clinical trial that evaluated the effect of a nurse-led family psychoeducation program on family members caring for a relative with dementia at home. Outcomes of this study included caregivers’ quality of life and burden, and patients’ symptoms and institutionalisation rates.

Hong Kong is embarking on a mental health care reform. In this issue, we are very privileged to publish the transcribed speech of Professor Louis Appleby’s presentation ‘mental health reform in England’ from the 4th Dr.

Gerald Choa Memorial Lecture. We can learn from Professor Appleby’s expert experience in planning for our future mental health care.

This issue would not be possible without the generous contributions of the authors, and the dedication of the Editorial Board and the colleagues who were involved in the production. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to them. The Editorial Board welcomes suggestions and comments from readers.

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Upcoming Themes

The Hong Kong Journal of Mental Health is the official publication of The Mental Health Association of Hong Kong and is published on a half-yearly basis. It is an interdisciplinary journal intended to serve as a focal point for exchange to enhance the definition and development of the field of mental health and to facilitate the application of facts, principles, and methods derived from psychiatry, psychology, medicine, sociology, epidemiology, anthropology, social work, nursing, education and other health-related disciplines.

The Editorial Board has suggested several upcoming themes including (but not limited to) the followings:

- ◆ Community Care of Mental Illness
- ◆ Family Mental Health
- ◆ Promoting Mental Health

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