Effect of Cyclone Pam on Mental Health Services in Vanuatu

Category 5, tropical Cyclone Pam, devastated the islands of Vanuatu, namely Efate, Erromango and Tanna on March 12th and 13th 2015 resulting in damage to infrastructure, agriculture and water supplies. Consequently, delivery of healthcare was compromised.

Dr Jimmy Obed, Senior Psychiatry Registrar at Port Vila Central Hospital, reports that the Mental Health Unit was badly damaged by fallen trees. Subsequently, the unit was closed for one month until repairs were made.

In the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Pam, Dr Obed visited nearby islands to provide medical assistance. Dr Obed states, “It’s unsure whether this is directly related to Cyclone Pam but we are seeing a lot of sleep and anxiety issues in women and some new cases of psychosis”.

WHO and other UN agencies deployed personnel and technical assistance to support the government respond to Cyclone Pam. This included providing health information and communication materials.

International NGO’s and aid agencies were also quick to respond. IsraAid, in conjunction with the Vanuatu Ministry of Health developed the “Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Program”. The program is a referral based whereby representatives from the community, professionals (e.g. teachers, church leaders) and clinicians are given knowledge and tools to identify, assess and address mental health issues. Dr Obed has witnessed increased awareness of mental health issues as a result of the program. “Clinicians who were trained in mhGAP before the disaster were able to incorporate the principles of mhGAP in the assessment and management of those referred to us”, he said. “I encourage the use of mhGAP by clinical staff”.

With increased awareness of mental health issues, it is important that more clinical services and resources are made available. “During and after Cyclone Pam, our staffs were committed to assisting patients, at the expense of assisting their families,” says Dr Obed, “However, if another cyclone was to occur, we would be better prepared to deliver health services”.

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Typhoon Maysak made landfall at Chuuk lagoon on Sunday 29th March 2015 and at Ulithi Atoll, Yap on the 1st of April, 2015 while neighboring islands within the two states also experienced strong destructive winds. The islands of Chuuk State, specifically Northern Nomoneas islands, Southern Nomoneas islands and Faichuuk islands, and Yap, specifically Fais and Ulithi, experienced peak damage with residents displaced.

Many organizations, countries and agencies are providing support and technical assistance to mobilize mental health recovery efforts in Chuuk and Yap. The Behavioral Health and Wellness Programs are putting efforts into increasing the capacity for psychosocial support via assessment, intervention and training approach.

Through the support of WHO under PIMHnet programme, maximizing sustainable local capacity via training in Psychological First Aid was conducted by psychiatrist Dr Sylvia Wally, and providers were mobilized to shelter sites to conduct assessment and intervention. Manuals and pamphlets were sent from WHO for use during the response and recovery period, for the purpose of information dissemination, raising awareness on mental health effects of natural disasters, coping strategies and contact information for specialized consultations.
Strengthening the network of mental health practitioners in Micronesia

- mhGAP Training of the Trainers and Supervisors workshop -

The mhGAP Training of the Trainers and supervisors (ToTS) is a model to train the mental health specialist (e.g. psychiatrists, mental health nurses, and psychologists) so that they could train the non-specialist health workers (e.g. general doctors and nurses) in mhGAP, and to be ready to supervise them. It is an efficient way to extend the reach of mhGAP training and increasing the service coverage.

Following the mhGAP ToTS delivered at Fiji in 2014, another ToTS workshop was held in Guam from the 23rd to the 25th of February 2015 to mental health specialists– 8 from Guam, 2 from the Republic of the Marshall Islands, 2 from Palau, 2 from the Federated States of Micronesia and 1 from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

The workshop was organised by the Guam Behavioural Health and Wellness Center in collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO). Dr Yutaro Setoya, Technical Officer for Mental Health at the WHO South Pacific office, facilitated the training. The training involved participating in mock mhGAP training in order to build confidence and familiarise the participants with the training material.

All 15 participants successfully completed the training and became mhGAP facilitators. Participants reported increased confidence, reinforcement of their clinical knowledge and development of unique training skills. The workshop also helped to strengthen the mental health specialist network in Micronesia.

Right after the ToTS, the newly trained mhGAP facilitator, Dr James Yaingeluo and Mr Freddy Langrine has successfully provided mhGAP training in RMI targeting the eleven nurses in Majuro. In addition, fourteen nursing students joined the training. More mhGAP trainings in Micronesian countries are expected in the future.

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