

FIRST EVER STUDY OF MENTAL HEALTH OF IRAQI PEOPLE FINDS HIGH LEVELS OF STRESS AND MENTAL DISORDERS, BUT ACCESS TO CARE IS ALARMINGLY LOW

Baghdad, Iraq: The first-ever Iraqi Mental Health Survey, launched today, has found that 16.5% of Iraqis have suffered from a mental health disorder during their lifetimes, but only 2.2% of these had received medical treatment.

The survey was undertaken by the Iraqi Ministries of Health and of Planning and the World Health Organization (WHO).

However resistance to the mental effects of stress and violence is high among adults in Iraq, according to the first study conducted on the prevalence of mental health disorders in the country, published 7 March 2009. A peer-reviewed paper based on the study has been published simultaneously in the journal *World Psychiatry*.*

"In light of these findings, we will be making improved mental health care a high priority within the primary health care system," said Iraqi Minister of Health Dr. Saleh Al Hassnawi. "This is a matter of great concern particularly when you consider the emotional distress experienced by so many during the recent past."

"In Iraq, there is considerable stigma attached to having a mental illness. We must implement large-scale community education programmes to decrease this stigma and encourage people to come forward and seek the treatment they need," added Dr Al Hassnawi.

Researchers studied a random sample of 4332 adults aged 18 years and older representing the Iraqi household population and from different governorates. They determined the prevalence of mental illness over a 30 day, 12 month, and lifetime period preceding the interview. The survey found that the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was 3.6%, lower than what one would have expected given the ongoing conflict.

"Stress levels are high while mental disorders are comparable to other countries. This suggests that Iraqis have had to develop coping strategies to survive during the past few decades of unrest," said Dr. Naeema Al Gasseer, WHO's representative to Iraq. "Stress has had an impact on the entire population and conflict has become almost a normal occurrence."

The IMHS also found that women had a higher prevalence of anxiety and behavioural disorders than men, while men had higher rates of substance abuse. The higher the exposure to trauma, the greater the chance of having mental illness.

Apart from gender differences, the survey found different prevalence of mental health disorders between those living in urban and rural areas, across different regions in Iraq and between people of different educational levels. "It is important to customize mental health care to serve the needs of different sectors of the population," said Dr. Abdul Rahman Othman Younis, Minister of Health, Kurdistan Region. "The survey has been very useful in pointing up these differences."

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"Until now, virtually nothing was known about the mental health of the Iraqi population", said Dr. Mahdi Al Alakm, Deputy Minister for Planning and Development and the Director-General for the Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology at the Ministry of Planning. "With this information, we will be able to better plan for future mental health needs. Knowing the magnitude of mental illness in the community is vital in order to plan, build and develop services."

Mr. Othman I. Shwani, Minister of Planning and Development in the Kurdistan Region, agreed. "We need to undertake further in-depth studies to make sure that we are tailoring treatment correctly to different needs," he said.

"Further research is needed to understand the coping strategies of the Iraqi people in the face of stress and conflict, and to study their longer-term effects on mental health. But the most important thing of all is to achieve the stability that allows us all to live peacefully and without fear," added Dr. Saleh Al Hassnawi.

*Alhasnawi *et al*, "*The prevalence and correlates of DSM-IV disorders in the Iraq Mental Health Survey (IMHS)*", published on-line on 7 March 2009 by the journal World Psychiatry, <http://www.wpanet.org>

Notes for editors:

Embargoed copies of the World Psychiatry paper are available at: rosswrite@mac.com, telephone: +44 7590 563 314

For more information:

Dr Naeema Algasseer, WHO Representative for Iraq; Tel: +962 6 553674; Mobile: +964 7901 944039;

Email: algasseern@irq.emro.who.int

Ruba Hikmat, Media Officer; WHO office in Jordan Tel: + 962 79 5096066; E-mail: hikmatr@irq.emro.who.int

More information can be found at: <http://www.emro.who.int/iraq/imhs.htm>

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