Busoga looks to new centre to tackle mental health crisis

Communities struggle as stigma and poverty block access to treatment.

BY ISAAC KINTU

A silent mental health crisis is tightening its grip on Busoga Sub-region, with rising cases of depression, anxiety, trauma and substance abuse exposing deep cracks in an already overstretched health system.

As poverty, unemployment and addiction take a toll on families, thousands are struggling without access to adequate care.

In response, stakeholders have established a new community-based mental health facility aimed at bridging the widening treatment gap.

The Brighter Days Mental Health Support Centre, an initiative of Sole Hope, will offer counselling, psychosocial support and mental health awareness programmes to communities across Busoga.

The move follows troubling trends observed during Sole Hope's 16-year work treating tungiasis (jiggers) among vulnerable populations. The organisation handles an average of 500 jigger patients monthly — about 6,000 annually.

According to the organisation's records, nearly 60 percent of those treated for jiggers also exhibit signs of mental health-related conditions, underscoring the close relationship between chronic physical suffering and psychological distress.

Ms Josephine Karumira, the country director at Sole Hope, said the centre was established after recognising the scale of the mental health burden among their patients.

"Out of the 500 people we treat for jiggers every month, about 60 percent present with mental health-related issues. This clearly shows the need to integrate mental health services into our interventions," she said.



Brighter Days Mental Health Support Centre in Budondo, Jinja City. PHOTO/ISAAC KINTU

Ms Karumira also expressed concern over increasing exposure to harmful online content, which she said is contributing to mental health challenges among the youth.

Ms Asher Cooley, the founder of Sole Hope, said the Brighter Days Mental Health Initiative, located in Buwenda on the Jinja–Budondo Road in Jinja Southern Division, will provide confidential and professional care in a safe and calm environment.

"For 15 years, we have treated the physical wounds of poverty, extracting over 1.5 million jiggers and treating more than 100,000 patients. Yet nearly half of those treated show critical mental health issues. Physical healing alone is not enough," she said.

The centre will offer counselling, psychotherapy, medically supervised rehabilitation, psychiatric medication, crisis intervention and family support services.

Ms Stella Lunyolo, a staff member at Sole Hope, said mental illness often affects personal hygiene, social relationships and the ability to function normally.

BACKGROUND

In Uganda, about one in four people faces a mental health disorder, yet up to 85 percent do not receive treatment due to stigma, poverty and limited services.

The country has roughly 1.4 mental health workers per 100,000 people, and the sector receives less than one percent of the national health budget.

Mr Moses Kyangwa, the Executive Director of Busoga Health Forum, attributed the growing cases to widespread substance abuse and economic hardship.

"Youth are increasingly turning to marijuana and alcohol due to stress caused by unemployment and poverty. Busoga is becoming an epicentre of these challenges," he said.

Jinja City Health Officer Dr Moses Kailanya said the region faces an acute shortage of specialists despite rising cases.

"We have only two psychiatrists in our Health Centre IV facilities serving a large population. Our facilities are small and cannot accommodate everyone who needs help," he said.

Dr Kailanya described the new centre as timely but called for greater government investment in mental health infrastructure and staffing.

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