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MENTAL HEALTH
AS RELATED TO MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

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Mental health in many countries is still a concept which is difficult to integrate into the current and universally accepted concept of health in general medicine. If we understand health as a unitary concept, in which the physical, psychological and social aspects of human life contribute towards a final goal: the well being of men, then mental health will have a definite word to say when we consider problems of health in general, and problems of maternal and child health in particular. In a short and informal talk of this kind, aiming primarily at giving broad lines of orientation, it is impossible to give anything of the nature of a detailed account of the relation between mental health on the one hand and maternal and child health on the other. However, a few points that have a practical and direct bearing on the problem might throw some light.

The nurse is a very important and indispensable figure in the field of maternal and child health. Whether her work is in maternity centres, public health centres, general or children's hospitals or schools, she comes into direct and constant contact with both mothers and children. In each of these respective areas the nurse is a potent factor in fostering good health in the growing generation. In this country, and perhaps also in many others represented in this Seminar, her words have a very strong influence on mothers, who very often have implicit faith in what she says. Unfortunately the training of nurses, up to the present, has been confined to the physical aspects of health and disease, with no, or hardly any mention of the psychological aspect.

In this way much of the help which the nurse could have given in maternal and child welfare work is unnecessarily omitted. A few examples may help illustrate what I mean.

During the ante-natal period, the nurse in the maternity centre can be of invaluable help to the expectant mother. Primiparous mothers are often scared of the experience of pregnancy and birth, which is often associated in their minds with death. Much of this anxiety is related to the relatively recently acquired misinformation or to earlier childhood fantasies concerning the phenomenon of birth. Simple talks with mothers, as individuals or groups, can help to a great extent in reducing this fear, which if it continues, is detrimental to both the mother's and child's health.

Attitudes of rejection on the part of the mother to the expectant baby have a number of causes which we need not deal with here. Whatever the cause is, the rejecting mother is depriving both the child and herself of the best chances for establishing a healthy mother-child relationship in the future. Many such cases, however, need expert psychiatric help, but many others can be helped to a big extent by nurses well trained in the basic principles of mental hygiene.

In the post-natal period, the work of the nurse is related in many respects to mental health. Indeed, it may be safely said that there is no part of the nurses' work which does not have a mental health aspect. The process of infant feeding, until recently considered to be a purely physical process, is now known to have a very important mental health component. This is related not only to the time and technique of feeding, or the kind of food given, but also to the way in which the child gets pleasure and satisfaction from the feeding process, which is his first experience with the external world. Many of the investigations carried out lately have shown that the drying up of the mother's milk is related in many instances to attitudes of rejection and hostility towards the child. A rejecting mother would not give her milk: her love to the child. Indeed, oral frustration in the first year of life is now looked upon as one of the commonest causes of neurotic illness later on. Much of this frustration can be avoided by wise guidance on the part of a well informed nurse.

The process of toilet training has its mental health aspects too. Too early or too rigid training may affect not only the child's health at the time, but may leave gross harm on his health later on. Many of the unhealthy personality traits and some of the severe neurotic illnesses that break up in adult life can be shown to have their

ots in the mother-child relationship, particularly during the toilet training process, are again the nurse can be of ample prophylactic value. Simple talks with mothers, preferably in groups, can help elucidating the intricacies of this process, correct faulty attitudes of mothers and safeguard against possible future ill-health.

Apart from such specific problems, the nurse in a maternity centre can give valuable help, which hardly anybody else can give, in maintaining the health of both the mother and the child. Minor everyday problems of child upbringing, which may detrimentally affect the mother's and child's health, can be promptly and effectively dealt with by the nurse if mental health has been an integral part of her training. Here discussion groups will usually serve as the best means for that purpose.

The nurse in children's hospitals can also be of much help from the mental health point of view. Falling ill is a stressing situation to many adults - it is much more so to children. Admission to a hospital is an exceptionally severe stress to a great number of people - it is often associated with tension, anxiety and fearful expectations. A warm reception followed by some explanations and a quiet encouraging attitude may help reducing the tension and putting the anxious child and his mother at ease. A knowledge of the psychological management of the patient should be an essential part of the training of all members of the nursing profession.

The role of the school nurse is not less important. She can be a useful guide to mothers in many of their own and their children's problems. As a member of the mothers-teachers associations and of the health societies at schools, she can always find a way of integrating mental health in the health problems of the mother and the child. Her contribution to health education can be of great value. In addition she should be able to discover, or at least to suspect, the psychological factor behind complaints that are apparently physical in nature, and so spare both the child and the family unnecessary suffering.

When I speak of training in the principles of mental health, it is not how much does the nurse know as much as her spontaneous ability to adopt attitudes that inspire confidence, give comfort and help the troubled mother to confide in her. And in order that the nurse can adopt such an attitude she needs first to be helped to come to better terms with her own self, to be freed from undue anxieties and to feel reasonably confident and secure. It is only then that she can play her role successfully; for in the field of mental health it is attitudes, not words that count and work most.

The role of the nurse was given the biggest share in my talk because she is evidently the most intimate figure to the family. This of course also applies to the Hakima. But other personnel in the field of maternal and child health cannot, and should not, be ignored. This applies particularly to the medical staff, whether general practitioners or pediatricians. The training of both in mental health is in many countries completely lacking. This creates a very difficult situation, because how can we expect them to deal effectively with problems of maternal and child health when one aspect of health hardly has any significance for them? The psychology of inter-familial relationships and the psychological aspects of child development should be an integral part of medical undergraduate training. The principles of psychosomatic medicine as applied to pediatrics and the psychological aspects of physical illness should be an important additional item in the training of pediatricians. After all, maternal and child health is the responsibility of the medically qualified practitioner; and whatever the nurse or the Hakima does in the field of mental health, it should be undertaken under his direct supervision, because the responsibility in matters of health and disease is finally and entirely his.

Just before concluding I may mention a few words about a new development which is taking place in many countries represented in this Seminar, i.e., the rapidly increasing industrialization. The mental health aspect of maternal and child health will soon, if it has not already, come into prominence. Nurseries provided with adequately trained personnel attached to industrial institutions which employ working mothers will be of invaluable help in maintaining the health of both the mother and her child.

I am fully aware that the points I mentioned cannot cover all that can be said about mental health as related to maternal and child health. But if these points could only stimulate discussion towards a useful goal, then my talk would have more than fulfilled its purpose.