

# Educating the innovators for community mental health promotion

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While there's far more focus than there has ever been on the importance of mental health; worldwide, the majority of people with mental health concerns do not access the care they need to transform their lives. This is particularly the case in South Africa, where the need is staggeringly high and exacerbated by widespread chronic poverty, crime, unemployment, violence, disease, discrimination and domestic abuse.



Jaclyn Lotter

According to Dr Jaclyn Lotter, the Academic Head at SACAP (the South African College of Applied Psychology) only around 15% of South Africans with mental health problems will receive some form of treatment in their lifetime. She says: "It is estimated that within our current model of mental health care, 0.39 psychiatrists and 0.69 psychologists are employed in the public sector for every 100 000 South Africans. By comparison, in Argentina, which is also a developing country, in 2010 there were an estimated 13.9 psycho-social providers employed by the State for every 100 000 people. Only 3% of the national health budget is allocated to mental health provision, equating to about R100 spent per person per year; and the majority of this budget goes to inpatient psychiatric care. This means that the one in six South Africans suffering from debilitating conditions such as depression, anxiety and addiction will not access the health care they need unless they can afford the high costs of private practitioners."

## ***Re-imagining the mental healthcare model***

Boosting the budget for mental health care provision is essential, but Dr Lotter echoes top global thought leaders in her insistence that the highly medicalised, professionalised approach to mental healthcare is in itself too limited and unsustainable. "There needs to be a shift in understanding that mental health is affected by a broad range of factors, and is therefore not the sole domain of psychologists and psychiatrists," she points out. "The triggers for mental health concerns are playing out in homes and schools, in places of study and of work, right in our communities. Alternative mental healthcare models are looking for solutions beyond traditional consulting rooms and clinics. Research in task-shifting has shown that lay counsellors who have been trained to provide specific interventions for common mental health problems such as depression and anxiety can achieve similar short-term outcomes to qualified mental health professionals. This is incredibly significant given the large proportion of people who will grapple with these issues at least once in their lifetimes. With strong referral networks in place, there is significant opportunity to make use of various levels of mental healthcare workers to help relieve the burden that our current healthcare systems cannot properly manage or sustain."

## ***Building a diverse mental healthcare workforce***

Last year, SACAP launched its first Masters degree, a two-year [MSocSci in Community Mental Health Promotion](#) which aims to develop strategic leaders and social innovators who can contend with South Africa's social realities and pioneer new and more effective models of mental healthcare that are community-based. "There's increasing awareness that creating multi-disciplinary spaces and recognising the interdependence of health and mental health creates opportunities to build holistic interventions and achieve a broader set of health outcomes," says Dr Lotter. "When we properly take into account the social causes of ill health and mental health, then we can recognise the pivotal role that communities can play in addressing the barriers to their own well-being. This opens up avenues for community empowerment and transformation

and the sharing of a deep understanding of social patterns that place communities at high risk of illness and harm. Collaborative spaces can be used to challenge these patterns with the aim of fundamentally changing the ways that communities function. This is at the heart of the MSocSci programme, which is multi-disciplinary, and draws students and educators across diverse social and health sectors. We don't just look at mental health from a disease perspective, but also from one that is seeking out social transformation and finding sustainable solutions for mental healthcare and promotion at a community level."

## ***Knowledge and skills for innovative community mental health***

Alongside the globally recognised need for community-based involvement in the pursuit of health and well-being, a need has risen for strategic leaders and social innovators who can conceptualise, catalyse and organise mental health strategies and interventions that we have never seen the likes of before. This demands skill sets that are notably different from traditional mental health practitioners who work within the narrow confines of the medicalised model. Dr Lotter asserts that community mental health workers that can bring about social transformation need highly developed people skills and the ability to effectively lead. "We need to be developing high performance leaders with the specialised skills to draw knowledge, strengths and capacity that already exists in communities and who can work collaboratively to find and implement sustainable solutions," she says. "Our MSocSci students are being dynamically equipped to engage with a broad range of stakeholders and produce relevant research that is aimed towards tackling the multidimensional determinates of mental health. Graduates of the programme are able to analyse complex health problems and produce multi-layered solutions, using practised skills and applied knowledge of community development and intervention, management and leadership. SACAP's aim is to boost the country's mental healthcare workforce with social scientists who are empowered to explore new ways of approaching health and well-being in South Africa with the ultimate goal of delivering responsive solutions to the mental health problems our country faces."

## ***Masters at SACAP***

SACAP's two-year Masters programme is accredited by the Council of Higher Education and registered by the South African Qualifications Authority on the National Qualifications Framework. The programme is offered at SACAP's Johannesburg and Cape Town campuses, and includes four core modules, four intensive modules, research related workshops and a mini dissertation. It is open to candidates with an appropriate NQF 8 (Honours level) qualification in a related discipline or any degree recognised as equivalent. Selection criteria are stringent and applicants need to demonstrate English language and writing proficiency adequate to meet the standards for postgraduate academic studies. The programme does not lead to registration with the HPCSA in any professional category or registration.

In order to ensure the integrity of SACAP's unique, intimate learning environments, the intake of MSocSci students is limited to twenty candidates per campus per year. SACAP's educational philosophy is student-centred and focused on providing a wraparound support service to help students achieve their academic goals. Successful applicants can expect to be immersed in experiential, theoretical and practical learning with quality curriculum materials and support and motivation in the demanding self-study component of the Masters programme. The small group classroom environment with a low student-educator ratio optimises the academic and interpersonal dynamics of the healthy teaching and learning environment that is the trademark of SACAP.

For further information, visit [www.sacap.edu.za](http://www.sacap.edu.za)

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