Introduction

The population of Ghana is currently close to 21.5 million people, with the World Health Organization (WHO) estimating that 650,000 of the population is suffering from severe mental illness disorders, and 2,166,000 having some form of moderate to mild mental disorder (WHO, 2009). The government has structured their mental health care system to include formal community mental health services, district mental health services, specially trained nurses and doctors, and three dedicated mental health hospitals. However, only 18 psychiatrists and five clinical psychologists make their primary practice in Ghana, so research into how the people view mental health and illness, and how their perceptions influence their treatment seeking behavior, is limited. Only 1% of the National Health Care budget goes towards the funding of mental health, with 80% of that going towards the maintenance of existing facilities.

Methods

The research team started by gaining an understanding of the mental health care system in Ghana by meeting with mental health professionals in Accra, Ghana, including Dr. Akwasi Osei, the Chief Psychiatrist and Mental Health Authority of Ghana. Dr. Osei informed the research group that policy makers had invested public funds and resources in training and regulating traditional healers, using the reasoning that suggested people were unaware of the causes of mental illness, and that they attributed mental illness to spiritual causes. The researchers also toured hospitals in Ghana, meeting with specially trained psychiatric nurses; and also touring one of the three dedicated mental hospitals in Ghana. In Larteh, the research team conducted a focus group that consisted of five men and three women that were recruited with the help of a community liaison. Themes were drawn out from the focus group, and were used to construct semi structured interviews that were then utilized with participants in Larteh, Ghana using convenient sampling.

Results

Indicators & Descriptions of Mental Health

Majority of participants (11/13) described mental illness as someone with abnormal behavior. Others described it as madness (1/13) or disability in the brain, body, and mind (2/13). Abnormal behaviors were the predominant indicators of mental health (11/13), but mental health was also indicated my mental well-being (1/13). Abnormal behaviors were indicated by violence and aggression, self-injurious behaviors, drug abuse, abnormal appearance, deficits in interpersonal communication and relationships, and deficits in decision-making and goal setting. 4/11 participants categorized all abnormal behaviors as mental illness or madness.

Children & Mental Health

Majority of participants (11/13) believed that mental illness is applicable to children. The causal factors attributed to children’s mental illness included physical (10/13) and social (1/13). Interestingly, none of participants in this study attributed children’s mental illness to spiritual causes. Social factors were described as learned behavior:

"Some children adopt the behavior they grow up with the behavior around them because the father or mother is mad"