

EC Healthcare Workers Suffering from Mental Illnesses Set To Be Prioritised at the Workplace

Eastern Cape healthcare workers who suffered mental illnesses due to trauma related to their jobs should be prioritised and treated, and not cut out.

These sentiments were shared by Honourable MEC Ms. Ntandokazi Capa, when she hosted World Mental Health Day Annual Lecture at the Oliver and Adelaide Tambo Regional Hospital in Mbizana.

According to statistics, mental illness was the third highest contributor to the burden of disease whilst 16.5% of South Africans suffered from a mental disorder in a given 12 months and about 75% have not been treated.

Capa said it was imperative to shine the spotlight on mental health, along with the rest of the world as the globe observed the day under the theme: "It is Time to Prioritise Mental Health in the Workplace."

Capa said these types of illnesses were still misunderstood in many communities and it was everyone's duty "scale up" awareness campaigns in order to educate people and to normalise talking about mental illnesses more.

"It is important for every person to understand that we are all candidates of mental health challenges. We must do our best to demystify mental health and demolish the stigma associated with it."

Professor Thupana Seshoka, chief psychiatrist and head of clinical department at Fort England Hospital concurred with Capa and said there was an undeniable need to address the mental illness issues in the workplace.

Seshoka also HOD of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Walter Sisulu University in Mthatha campus, said managers needed to start learning how to identify mental health issues on time.

"Looking at signs and identifying them early so that we can diagnose it early and provide support to our employees.

"Because it will start affecting our employees and most of them once affected, their productivity drops and their performance is not as expected and they do not do their jobs effectively."

Seshoka said managers needed to familiarise themselves with the common mental issues like burnout, anxiety, depression, posttraumatic disorder.

He warned that should these examples be ignored, they could lead to abuse or excessive use of substances that may lead to poor performance at the workplace.

"Employees can be severely affected because some employees even commit suicide because of these issues. "Managers should know the factors contributing to these mental issues. For example bullying, harassment at the workplace. Unrealistic expectations, workload, long working hours.

"Poor communication at work, discrimination, stigma, because most people are reluctant to speak about their mental health issues because of stigma. Because they think if they talk about their issues they will be seen as weak or as people who can not perform their duties as expected. So they decide to keep quiet and as a result they don't get the support and assistance they deserve."

Seshoka said workers needed to be appreciated for their effort at work as that contributes to an employees mental wellness.

He recommended the development of educational programs where all employees were educated about mental health illnesses in order to encourage people to seek medical assistance.

"Appreciate the workers and recognise them. Those who deserve opportunities for development in the workplace in terms of promotion please promote them because it encourages an individual and, as a result and it reduces mental illnesses in the workplace."

He said when a person was depressed, they would have mood swings, feel sad and irritable, and anger, perform poorly, with poor memory, and they would absent from work as they lacked motivation.

"Even if it's someone who's used to talking, you will see them withdrawn and some will start using substances because they are self medicating and they want to run away from those feelings.

"Those are the early signs we should look for in order to assist them," said Seshoka.

Capa said the United Nations Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for 2024 was a global call for organisations, teams and individuals to step up efforts to:

Prevent risks to mental health at work;

Promote well-being and protecting mental health at work; and support personnel with mental health conditions.



"As a department we must also do our best to ensure that our personnel get the mental health services they need so that they will continue doing what they do best – save lives.

"We need management to ensure that our employee assistance programmes / wellness programmes are adequately resourced so that we are able to meet the need for services.

"It cannot be correct that last year only 3 008 employees were assisted out of a workforce of 48 000. We need to improve so that our staff – who are our best assets will get the assistance they need," said Capa.

Capa said the fact that only 40% of the Eastern Cape Department of Health employees were currently on medical aid, meant the majority got their service from the public sector when they need treatment.

"On a daily basis, our employees, particularly first responders deal with traumatic situation, which might impact on their mental health and well-being.

"Health work is by nature caring and daily witness of trauma, illness, injury and death, weighs heavily on employee's mental health.

There is high incidence of burnout, compassion fatigue and post-traumatic stress, so it is imperative that we ensure that our employee assistance programme/ wellness programmes are adequately resources and effective.

"We must care for the carers.

Our records show that workplace drivers of mental illness include:

Weak leadership and management practices;

Harassment and bullying;

Discrimination and exclusion – age, gender, race;

Conflict;

Poor / unsafe working conditions;

Lack of control – job design and workload;

Inadequate work resources; and

Poor work-life balance,"

Capa implored managers to create 'conducive environments' so that their staff could thrive. She said toxic work environments also contributed to mental health issues.

"Let's ensure that we operate in spaces that are friendly and psychologically safe
Prioritising the wellness of healthcare workers is essential to maintaining a healthy and motivated workforce."

Capa said although there was a lot that still needed to be done to improve mental health services, a lot of work had already in motion.

"Our hospitals provide 72-hours observation services, including child and adolescent mental health. This is over and above the dedicated," she said.



Capa said the work included the state-of-the-art child and adolescent mental health unit at Fort England, which the department spent R29.1-million renovating. She said the opening up of that unit had improved access of mental health services in the province.

By MFUNDO PILISO

