

# MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE IN SINGAPORE

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**ABSTRACT**

The year 1928 marked the beginning of the mental health service in Singapore. From a large asylum which provided mainly custodial care the mentally ill were managed by a handful of expatriate medical pioneers and nurses. Drugs were limited and hospitalisations lasted years.

The scene has changed tremendously over the last six decades.

Today the Mental Health Service in Singapore is largely provided by the public sector with contributions from private and voluntary organisations. It provides a comprehensive and integrated programme consisting of both hospital-based and community-based treatment programmes with the objectives to promote good mental health for everyone as well as to provide the best possible treatment for those afflicted with mental illnesses of all types<sup>(1)</sup>.

With the rapid development of community-based mental healthcare, several changes have taken place to reflect this trend.

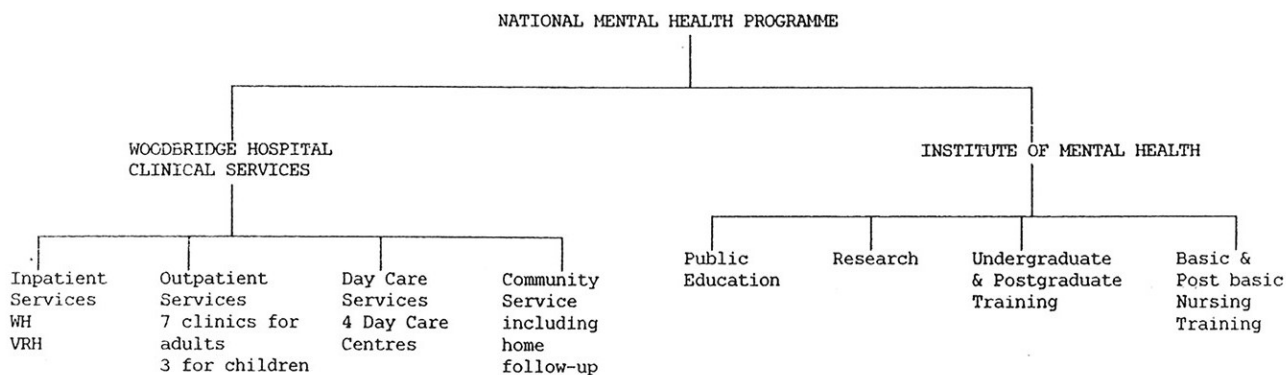
Besides introducing a wide range of community support services and greater liaison with primary care givers, the need to educate medical students and doctors, members of the public, people involved in healthcare in the voluntary sector and others about mental health and illness has been recognised to be an important component in the delivery of good mental healthcare.

As a step forward the National Mental Health Programme has been launched by the Ministry of Health in 1993 to further improve the mental health service that is currently available (Fig 1). The newly established Institute of Mental Health will serve as the education, training and research arm of the National Mental Health Programme. Together with the new Woodbridge Hospital, mental healthcare in the future will be professionally organised, coordinated and community-orientated.

**Keywords:** comprehensive mental health programme, integrated mental health programme, hospital-based treatment programmes, community-based treatment programmes.

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Fig 1



WH : Woodbridge Hospital  
VRH : View Road Hospital

**HOSPITAL-BASED SERVICES**

Inpatient treatment for the mentally ill is presently being provided at Woodbridge Hospital, a government hospital which is the largest in Singapore with 2,500 beds. Through its 24 hours emergency service all types of referrals are accepted for assessment and/or admissions. The majority of referrals are from

doctors from government polyclinics whilst referrals from private practitioners, self referrals and those from private and restructured hospitals constitute the remainder<sup>(1)</sup>.

**Treatment Programmes In Woodbridge Hospital**

In the hospital, treatment programmes for patients aged 18 and above are administered by a multidisciplinary team working very closely with families. The Child Psychiatric Inpatient Unit caters to young patients up to the age of 18. There are also service provisions for the elderly with psychological problems and for patients admitted under the Criminal Procedure Code and under the Mental Disorders and Treatment Act.

Except for the forensic wards the trend is towards short hospitalisations averaging 3 to 4 weeks with early reintegration into the society.

Treatment modalities include the use of effective drugs which is sometimes combined with electroconvulsive therapy. Other psychological techniques eg behaviour modification, cognitive therapy, social skill training and psychotherapy are used

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whenever indicated.

Following the acute treatment, a comprehensive rehabilitation programme is planned for the patient with the aim to restore him to his maximum level of independence. Through structured activities at wards and later at the Occupational Therapy Department and educational talks at the Patient Education Centre the patient slowly learns to regain confidence in himself and acquire new skills which will help him through when he leaves the hospital.

For those who require longer periods of rehabilitation, View Road Hospital which is situated in Sembawang, serves as a centre for such a purpose. The hospital only takes in referrals from Woodbridge Hospital.

Families are encouraged right from the beginning to get involved in the treatment programmes. Educational talks and counselling are some of the other activities provided by the medical social workers and nursing staff to help families cope.

### **Restructured And Private Hospital**

Besides Woodbridge Hospital, inpatient care for the mentally ill is also available in the following restructured and private hospitals:

- (a) Psychological Medicine Unit at Tan Tock Seng Hospital;
- (b) Psychological Unit at National University Hospital,
- (c) Adam Road Hospital, and
- (d) Mount Elizabeth Hospital.

With the exception of Adam Road Hospital, these hospitals tend to accept cases which are milder and less disturbed.

Arrangements for hospitalisations are usually made by the private psychiatrist with the hospital concerned.

### **COMMUNITY BASED SERVICES**

Besides providing inpatient treatment, Woodbridge Hospital has over the years built up a comprehensive network of community based services which consist of the following:

- (a) Outpatient Services,
- (b) Community Psychiatric Nursing Service,
- (c) Day Treatment Centre and Day Centres,
- (d) Hostel in View Road Hospital,
- (e) Family Support Groups and counselling services.

#### **(a) Government Outpatient Services**

Currently outpatient services for adults aged 18 and above are provided at the following places:

- \* Alexandra Psychiatric Clinic which is a stand alone clinic,
- \* Bedok Polyclinic,
- \* Hougang Polyclinic,
- \* Jurong Polyclinic,
- \* Toa Payoh Polyclinic
- \* Tampines Polyclinic,
- \* Institute of Mental Health (IMH) Clinic which is situated in the new Woodbridge Hospital.

Child Psychiatric services are available at Child Psychiatric Clinic at the Institute of Health, Tampines and Jurong Polyclinics and at IMH Clinic.

#### *Modes of Referral*

Except for Bedok Polyclinic all the clinics accept new referrals for psychiatric consultations. About 50% of referrals are from doctors from Primary Health Division with 10% from general practitioners, 30% from restructured, private hospitals and others and 10% are self referrals<sup>(2)</sup>. The Child Psychiatric clinics receive referrals from schools as well.

Fifty percent of new patients seen at outpatient level come under the minor psychiatric morbidity diagnostic group whilst early and milder state of psychoses eg schizophrenia, affective

psychoses form the other 50%<sup>(2)</sup>.

#### *Treatment Programmes At Outpatient Clinics*

Besides providing consultations for new referrals which is usually in the morning from 8 am to 1 pm and on certain days at the various clinics, follow-up treatment for patient discharged from Woodbridge Hospital is also available in all the above mentioned clinics.

Currently all the follow-up clinics are in the afternoon from 2 pm to 4.30 pm.

The IMH Clinic also runs an Evening Clinic fortnightly from 5 pm to 7 pm for patients who are actively employed and who are unable to attend clinics during office hours.

Besides drugs, individual and group psychotherapy, cognitive therapy, behaviour modification and other techniques are used to augment treatment of patients.

Psychological assessment and therapy are provided by psychologists in Alexandra, Tampines and Hougang Polyclinics.

In all the clinics a medical social worker is in attendance on certain days to provide counselling to patients and their relatives.

At Alexandra Psychiatric Clinic an Alcohol Dependency Programme has been established since 1990 to provide assessment and treatment for people with drinking problems. With the help of nursing staff and volunteers from Alcoholic Anonymous, support groups are conducted on a regular basis for alcoholics and their relatives.

Psychogeriatric assessment and treatment for elderly patients aged 60 and above is presently being conducted weekly on Thursday at Hougang Polyclinic.

#### *Private Psychiatric Clinics*

Psychiatric consultations by private psychiatrists are available during office hours at the various private clinics listed in the telephone directory.

#### **(b) Community Psychiatric Nursing Service**

This is an aftercare service which was set up in November 1988 to provide community-based nursing care and support to the patient and his family after his discharge from the hospital.

Through this service which promotes early intervention by dedicated community psychiatric nurses, relapses are reduced and rehospitalisations minimised. Families are also given greater support which increases their confidence in looking after their mentally ill members.

Patients in need of this service are referred either by the psychiatrist or medical social worker. Presently only patients known to Woodbridge Hospital are accepted.

A Selection/Review Committee consisting of a psychiatrist, a nursing officer coordinator and community nurses attends to the referrals and makes decision to accept or reject the case.

Once accepted, the Community Psychiatric Nurse or "CPN" visits the patient in his home. Depending on the request in the referral, the nurse's task may be to counsel the patient or family, administer injection or help bring a relapsed patient to hospital for admission.

Treatment is given over a period of 6 months and a patient is discharged from the service once the problem is solved.

#### **(c) Day Treatment Centre and Day Centres**

The Government Day Treatment Centre and Day Centres offer a variety of rehabilitation programmes with the aim to maintain the mentally ill in the community by keeping them meaningfully occupied with structured activities. All day centres offer vocational training and job placements upon com-

pletion of the programmes.

The centres currently available are:

- (i) Alexandra Day Centre
- (ii) Mandalay Day Centre
- (iii) IMH Day Treatment Centre and Day Centre

A new day centre which will be located in Choa Chu Kang is being planned for 1994.

These centres are managed by staff from Woodbridge Hospital and they accept patients from government and restructured hospitals only.

#### *Day Care Services By The Voluntary Organisations*

Other day centres organised by voluntary organisations are as follows:

- (i) East Coast Care Centre,
- (ii) Elliot Road Care Centre

Both these centres are managed by the Anglican Welfare Council, a Christian organisation.

- (iii) New Horizon Centre which caters mainly for elderly patients with Senile Dementia. This centre is a joint venture between the Ministry of Health and the National Council of Social Services.

- (vi) SAMH Day Care Centre by the Singapore Association for Mental Health.

#### **(d) Hostel in View Road Hospital**

View Road Hospital offers hostel facilities to homeless patients who have completed the rehabilitation programmes and are actively employed.

#### *Contributions From Voluntary Organisations*

Majority of the hostels and half-way houses are provided by the voluntary organisations for people with emotional or psychological problems and who are rejected by their families for various reasons. Referrals can be made by anyone to the officers-in-charge of the respective places.

Those that are available are few and they are:

- (i) SAMH Half-way House in Rochester Park which has 24 places for female psychiatric patients undergoing rehabilitation for a period varying from 6 months to a year or more.

- (ii) East Coast Care Centre for male patients who spend 3 to 6 months in residential rehabilitation programme.
- (iii) Elliot Care Centre which has a residential Crisis Unit admitting female patients and their children in distress for short period of time.
- (iv) Whampoa Care Centre for female patients.

#### **(e) Family Support Groups and Counselling Services**

Woodbridge Hospital runs support groups on a regular basis for families of mentally ill patients as well as for people with drinking problems.

Counselling for patients and their relatives are conducted by nurses, medical social workers and psychiatrists during office hours. The community psychiatric nurses and medical social workers also provide telephone counselling.

#### **CONTRIBUTION FROM VOLUNTARY AGENCIES**

Voluntary agencies<sup>(3)</sup> which provide telephone and/or person-to-person counselling are:

- (i) Alcoholic Anonymous
- (ii) Counselling and Care Centre
- (iii) East Coast Care Centre
- (iv) Eight Hundred Counselling Centre
- (v) Elliot Road Care Centre
- (vi) New Horizon Centre
- (vii) SAMH Counselling Service
- (viii) Samaritans of Singapore

Some, like the SAMH Oasis Club, also organise social and recreational activities for patients with mental illness with the help of professional staff and volunteers on a weekly basis.

The New Horizon Centre holds support groups for families of those afflicted with senile dementia on a regular basis.

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