

Bridging the gap

We can learn from the role of NGOs in addressing the evolving needs of Australia's mental health population



MINDTALK

BY DR ROZANIZAM ZAKARIA

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AS a psychiatrist trained in Malaysia, my fellowship in Perth, western Australia, gave me invaluable insights into the country's mental health landscape.

Immersed in the field, I witnessed firsthand the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals grappling with mental health issues across diverse communities, especially in the context of child and adolescent psychiatry. Australia, like many developed nations, confronts a complex array of factors contributing to its mental health burden, including socioeconomic disparities, cultural stigmas, and gaps in accessible care.

Against this backdrop, one thing that strikes me the most is the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as a critical component in addressing the evolving needs of Australia's mental health population, both in preventative efforts and intervention strategies. This is something that we have started seeing developing more in Malaysia. However, of course, there is always something for us to learn and adapt from others' experiences.

Like the global trend of mental health, it has become evident that Australia is facing a mounting burden of mental health issues, with rates of anxiety, depression, and other disorders on the rise. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 42.9 per cent of people aged 16–85 years had experienced a mental disorder at some time in their life, with anxiety being the most common group (17.2 per cent of people aged 16–85 years). Youths were among most significantly affected, with 38.8 per cent aged 16–24 years having had a mental disorder for 12 months.

These statistics underscore the urgent need for proactive measures to address the underlying causes and adequately support those affected. However, significant challenges in the public sector hinder timely and comprehensive care delivery.

Capacity constraints and resource shortages strain mental health services, leading to lengthy wait times, limited accessibility and gaps in provision. Addressing these chal-

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lenges is critical in ensuring that individuals in need receive the support and treatment they require, underscoring the importance of collaborative efforts between governmental agencies, NGOs, and the broader community.

THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF NGOS

The crucial role of NGOs in mental health cannot be overstated, particularly in their proactive efforts towards prevention through community outreach and education. NGOs head various initiatives aimed at raising awareness about mental health issues, breaking down stigma, and promoting early intervention.

Through innovative campaigns, workshops, and outreach programmes, NGOs engage with diverse communities to educate and empower individuals to recognise signs of mental distress and seek help when needed. These efforts not only promote mental health literacy but also foster a supportive environment conducive to seeking timely intervention.

Research has shown that early intervention significantly reduces the severity and long-term impact of mental health issues, highlighting the pivotal role of NGOs in mitigating the burden of mental illness on individuals and society. Therefore, the public mental health system can focus more on those with the more severe spectrum of illness.

I have seen many patients benefit from services such as counselling, community support, carer training and psychoeducation provided by NGOs as part of their recovery process either prior to getting professional help or as part of their step-down recovery journey.

According to the National Mental Health Strategies (NMHS) for 2020–2022, tabled in the Australian Parliament, among crucial areas of mental health that NGOs in Australia have been involved in include:

- Information, mutual support, self-help and advocacy
- Vocational and educational
- Individual and group psychosocial rehabilitation and support
- Housing and support options
- Respite, family and carer services

One of the most prominent mental health NGOs that play these roles in Australia is Beyond Blue. It actively provides support and resources to individuals, families, and communities affected by mental health issues. Founded in 2000, Beyond Blue aims to increase awareness and understanding of mental health, reduce stigma, and promote early intervention and support for those experiencing mental health challenges.

FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY CONCERNS

The organisation offers a range of services, including helplines, online forums, information resources and educational programmes. Their support services are designed to assist people at all stages of their mental health journey, from providing immediate crisis support to offering ongoing guidance and encouragement for recovery and well-being.

Beyond Blue plays a vital role in advocacy and policy development, working to influence positive change in mental health policies and practices at the national level. It strives to create a more supportive and inclusive society for people affected by mental health conditions through campaigns, research initiatives, and partnerships with government agencies and other organisations.

Nevertheless, there is also a growing concern around funding and sustainability, as adequate resources are essential in maintaining and expanding these services. Long-term commitment and innovative funding models are vital to ensure the ongoing viability of mental health programmes and initiatives. The funds from the government, private sector and public certainly play huge roles in helping these organisations survive.

To learn from all these, Malaysia needs to start looking ahead and develop more opportunities for integrating and expanding mental health services in the community. By fostering collaboration between various stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, healthcare providers, and community organisations, we can build a more cohesive and comprehensive mental health system that meets the diverse needs of our population.

Embracing innovation, leveraging technology, and promoting community engagement via the help of NGOs are among key strategies for driving positive change and advancing mental health equity across the nation.

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