



Singapore Roundtable: Strengthening Mental Health Care

DATE: Friday, 29 January 2021
TIME: 3.00pm-5.00pm SGT
VENUE: [Online] Zoom

Speakers

- Robyn Mildon, Founding Executive Director of the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI)
- Maryanna Abdo, Managing Director of CEI.

Moderator

- Stacey Choe, APC Director

Participants

- Annette Akman, Anita Fam, Bolor Lorinet, Claire Chua, Danny Yong, David Chan, Diane Geng, Gail Lien, Guangshen Gao, Laurence Lien, Lim Feng Ling, Lionel Xiaobo Li, Mafruza Khan, Mark Chang Mun Kee, Mary Ann Tsao, Mei Wen, Michiel Brenninkmeijer, Pang Sze Khai, Peggy Moh

Agenda

- 3.00pm: APC introduction and welcome
- 3.05pm: Background into APC work on understanding the mental health landscape in Singapore
- 3.15pm: Dialogue with CEI: What should be the priorities for philanthropists to address mental health in Singapore?
- 4.15pm: Member discussion
- 4.30pm: Event ends

Meeting notes

3.00pm: APC introduction and welcome by Laurence Lien

- Laurence opened the session by outlining Singapore's mental health crisis, which has been exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic.
- Laurence called on philanthropists to contribute to this space, in particular by taking an evidence-based approach, which CEI is proficient in.

3.05pm: Background into APC work on understanding the mental health landscape in Singapore

- Stacey Choe recapped the work that APC had done leading up to this roundtable.
 - APC held its first roundtable discussion on mental health on 20 January 2020 at Caregivers' Alliance. APC found through a poll in August that members were most interested in mental health issues around (i) children/youths and (ii) senior citizens.
- Lee Jing Ning, APC intern, shared about the research and outreach work that APC did.

- APC spoke to organisations such as Majority Trust, Touch Community Services, NCSS, Over the Rainbow to understand their work in the mental health space.
- APC conducted a brief landscape research to assess the accessibility of three broad categories of mental health interventions in Singapore. Their findings are as follows:
 - Firstly, programmes to promote the mental well-being of the general population were often not evidence based.
 - Secondly, targeted interventions for groups with higher risk factors and minimal symptoms of mental disorder often lacked comprehensive data, making it hard to determine if there was unmet demand.
 - Finally, early detection, treatment and rehabilitation interventions were expensive and had insufficient capacity, hence resulting in long waiting times.

3.15pm: Dialogue with CEI: What should be the priorities for philanthropists to address mental health in Singapore?

- Robyn introduced CEI and its experience in mental health and related areas. CEI aims to improve the lives of those facing adversity by using contextual-based evidence to create sustainable interventions.
- Robyn shared about the mental health context in Singapore.
 - Covid-19 pandemic has led to more people being interested in mental health, and a surge in activity in tackling mental health issues
 - Some significant challenges in the mental health space included a shortage of well-trained mental health professionals and competing demands for investments. Hence, it is important that solutions are evidence-based and effective, tailored to Singapore's context.
- Robyn highlighted that many mental health systems around the world are plagued with fundamental shortcomings – the scene is often fragmented and lacks routine outcome monitoring.
- Robyn shared that philanthropists – with independence, agility and risk appetite – can contribute to (i) better interventions and services, (ii) sector strengthening, (iii) discovery research and (iv) advocacy
- Robyn shared the University of Pennsylvania's [The Center for High Impact Philanthropy's](#) (CHIP) review of strategies to address mental health and addiction, which is a useful framework for informing action.
- Robyn highlighted some successful innovations around the world.
 - [MoodMission](#) is an app that incorporates cognitive behavioural therapy to provide remote support for mental illness. It is also important to consider how the uptake of apps can be improved through implementation science strategies.
 - [Beyond Blue](#) started in Australia and currently runs helplines and builds the capacity of the mental health sector in Australia by using evidence.
 - [Well Being Trust](#) functions as a catalyst in the sector by supporting and evaluating system changes.
 - [Wellcome Trust](#) has done high quality systematic reviews to identify active ingredients for mental wellbeing.
- Robyn highlighted the importance of considering the scalability of a programme – a good sense of scale is whether it can be expanded to 70% of the population.

3.45pm: Roundtable discussion

- After Robyn's sharing, members and guests had the opportunity to share their thoughts.
- Anita Fam, President of NCSS, shared about NCSS's dipstick quality of life study involving a cohort of 900 participants. The first round was conducted during Circuit Breaker, the second during Phase

2 and the third one is coming up soon. In Phase Two, they found that the quality of life improved for persons with mental health conditions, compared to during Circuit Breaker.

- However, this could be due to a selection bias. Social Service Agencies (SSAs) served as a touchpoint for participant selection, hence participants were, at the time of survey, receiving assistance from SSAs. It is unclear how quality of life was affected for individuals who were not receiving such assistance.
- Anita also shared that NCSS is currently working with the Agency for Integrated Care and the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre to create an [Alliance for Action](#) in the area of caregiving.
 - They intend to do a detailed landscape of caregiving for (i) persons with mental health conditions, (ii) persons with disabilities and (iii) seniors.
 - They hope to bring together service providers, philanthropists and government together, be it upstream (on research) or downstream (on services and advocacy) work.
- David Chan, director at SMU's Behavioural Sciences Institute and a professor of psychology, emphasised the importance of first understanding mental health as an issue of general wellbeing, before focusing on more intensive clinical pathways. This expands the number of people an intervention can help and also reduces stigma towards mental health. It would also encourage different sectors to realize the importance and relevance of mental wellbeing to their existing areas of interest.
- Robyn shared that there is debate around whether mental health issues are truly increasing or if the data reflects confounding factors such as (i) a reduction in stigma against talking about such issues and (ii) an improved understanding of the mental health illness symptoms.
- Robyn felt that a service response, such as psychiatrists and trained psychologists, will never be sufficient to meet demand. It would be more useful to focus on peer support.
- Bolor Lorinet is interested in studying how interventions for young people can be more accessible and affordable. This includes providing greater assistance in schools and reducing cultural stigma.
- Laurence asked if members were interested in youth mental health. A majority of the participants indicated interest.
- Laurence highlighted two areas of interest in youth mental health issues: (i) downstream provision of interventions and help to those with mental health conditions and (ii) upstream work to understand why mental health conditions are increasing.
- Danny Yong shared about Majority Trust, which provides funding and support for organizations, including a fund focused on suicides in youths (Musim Mas Bluestar Fund) .
- Danny asked if there is evidence around the link between mindfulness and wellbeing, especially as the use of devices increases. If so, how can it be embedded into schools.
 - Robyn said that there have been systematic reviews which support the effectiveness of mindfulness as a prevention strategy. Robyn also agreed that screen time is an important issue to consider, as found in a [NUS GUSTO study](#).
 - David agreed that mindfulness is worth pursuing but highlighted the importance of contextualizing such evidence to Singapore.
- David highlighted the importance of segmenting different populations amongst youths. Youths from lower socio-economic status (SES) might face material concerns while those from higher SES might suffer from affective issues.
- David felt the government provides strong support networks for the most vulnerable in society, but less so for lower to upper middle SES.
 - Robyn highlighted that quality of service is often proportionately related to wealth. Hence, it is still important to help those in the lowest SES.
- Michiel Brenninkmeijer asked if there is any evidence on the link between food and mental illnesses.

- Robyn shared that there is strong evidence that food does have an impact on people's moods. [Campbell Collaboration](#) has done some good reviews on this. However, there's currently insufficient emphasis on food.
- Robyn introduced an opportunity to partner with CEI on their plan to conduct a landscape study on mental health in Singapore. The study will hope to complement the existing taskforces and surveys that the government is already conducting in Singapore. Maryanna Abdo added that the study is intended to be a springboard for action – it will highlight pivotal evidence and existing gaps to identify potential innovations.
- The study would aim to capture the gaps in Singapore and highlight important insights. It would also focus on leveraging evidence in mental health in Singapore.

4.15pm: Member discussion

- Laurence invited members to share about (i) the target groups and (ii) the types of intervention they are interested in.
- Mary Ann Tsao shared that they are interested in the older population.
- Mary Ann Tsao shared that her family foundation is interested in creating better environments to support mental wellbeing. The Tsao Foundation is interested in intergenerational living and how this can improve mental wellbeing for both older and younger populations.
- Gail Lien is interested in studying the causes of mental health issues for upper-middle SES adolescents, such as high stress environment or overprotection. Gail also noted that symptomatic treatments sometimes overshadow the addressing of root causes.
- Claire Chua shared that Quantedge is interested in mental health as a way to improve protective factors for disadvantaged populations, so as to augment the effectiveness of other interventions focused on social mobility.
- Pang Sze Khai shared that while Octava Foundation is not currently focusing on mental health, they are willing to participate in potential APC initiatives.
- Anita shared that she is personally interested in suicide prevention for young people. She is currently considering if she can help scale the work that Caring for Life does.
- Mei Wen shared that she has been involved with an organization called Youth Focus in Perth, which does counselling and advocacy in schools and farming communities.
- Laurence asked if anyone had thoughts about CEI's proposal for a landscape study. Stacey shared that CEI is also interested in studying the efficacy of existing interventions.
 - Khai expressed interest in potentially funding CEI's study.
 - Anita wondered if there was already similar work being done, and if it would be possible to connect CEI with such work.

Next steps

- Laurence suggested mapping out and identifying different clusters of interests that members might have.
- CEI to share more information on their intended landscape research and how it is situated against the broader context of what is already being done in Singapore.