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A caring heart for the mentally ill

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When I was a medical student and in training in the 1960s and '70s, cancer and mental illness were discussed in hushed voices, for both had stigmas. Since then things have changed for cancer, because we talk about it more openly now. But not for mental illness — it still has failed to shake off its shameful connotation.

Yet, psychiatric illnesses maim and kill just as other diseases do. Globally, mental maladies have a staggering number of victims: just from suicide alone, every year about 1 million die. And depression, schizophrenia, dementia, alcohol- dependency, substance abuse and the like make up 14 percent of the global disease burden, surpassing cancer and cardiovascular ailments. But these numbers may be low because of the man-made disasters, such as wars and armed conflicts, with their rising number of PTSDs and mental afflictions among the refugees and displaced persons. Worse, the most vulnerable — children and women — are disproportionate sufferers.

The number of the U.S. mental health patients is also telling: one in four adults experience mental illness in a given year, 10 million of whom are serious enough to be disabled and are unable to function or work; the severely affected group die 25 years earlier than the general population.

Moreover, the mentally ill have a higher incidence of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular problems. As a result, besides the social cost, the economic cost is enormous. Sadly, nearly half the psychiatric patients in the U.S. don't get appropriate care, while in the developing nations such as India, about 90 percent don't get any evidence-based treatment. On top of that, minorities everywhere fare the worst.

Though every nation in the world is deeply affected by the neuropsychiatric diseases, there was little coordination among the mental health programs, especially in the developing countries. Then came a figure like Vikram Patel, who brought the issue to the open.

He is making a global impact by being a prime mover of "Movement for Global Mental Health," an organization that has more than 10,000 individuals working with 200 institutions around the world. They are striving to follow the World Health Organization recommendations, which include the following: providing mental health treatment in primary care, making psychotropic drugs available, giving the care in the communities where the patients live, educating the public, instituting national policies and legislation, and supporting research on prevention and treatment.

Patel's distinction is that he goes beyond the Ivory Tower. He is the co-founder of Sangath, a NGO in Goa, India. Sangath won the 2008 MacArthur Foundation's international prize for a pioneering approach in mental health care: training lay people to deliver treatments in the patients' own neighborhoods. In 2015, Time magazine selected him as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. And in 2016, he received the Pardes Humanitarian Prize in Mental Health.

Accolades aside, he is a distinguished academic, researcher, writer, editor and speaker. Currently, among his other duties, he is a professor of international mental health at London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and founder of its Centre for Global Mental Health. His well-written, accessible manual, "Where There Is No Psychiatrist: A Mental Health Care Manual, " is aimed at health care workers, nurses and primary care doctors. (An updated edition is in progress.) In addition, he is a co-editor of a respected book, "Global Mental Health: Principles and Practice."

Asked who are his heroes, he points to the millions of mentally ill who have come out of the shadows to speak publicly about living with the curse of a cruel stigma. Patel wants us look at the mentally ill with empathy and compassion. Psychologist Barbara Van Dahlen said of him the best: "He provides hope that mental illness and trauma make us neither weak nor unworthy of love and respect."

For Patel's seminal contributions, he is the 12th recipient of the prestigious Austin College Posey Leadership Award, which offers recognition and \$100,000 to a servant-leader who has changed people's lives for the better. On Tuesday, Patel will give presentations at the Austin College campus. Then on Wednesday, in the morning, he will give talks at UT Southwestern Medical School; and in the evening, at a ceremony at Perot Museum of Nature and Science, he will receive the award and deliver a speech.

Fazlur Rahman is a senior trustee of Austin College and a selection committee member of its Posey Leadership Award-Global Outreach Forum. He is also an advisory council member of the Center for Medical Humanities and Ethics at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. He can be reached at frahmanmd@gmail.com. Dr. Rahman is the author of the memoir, "The Temple Road: A Doctor's Journey."