



FIXING OUR BROKEN MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

Mental illness deserves more attention in the public sector, writes **Siphelele Buthelezi**

MENTAL illness is the neglected “Cinderella” of public health – as was witnessed when 94 mentally ill patients died in the Life Esidimeni tragedy in Gauteng last year.

But the new head of psychiatry at the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s (UKZN) Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine, Professor Bonga Chiliza, 41, is determined to encourage more new doctors to become psychiatrists and in so doing lead to deeper understanding of psychiatric diseases.

Chiliza has been in his new position for six weeks and is already working on a strategy to attract more doctors into psychiatry.

“There is a shortage of psychiatrists in government hospitals in this province because we have not trained enough of them; also, the ones currently in

training are not passing quickly enough, they’re not getting their degrees on time,” he says.

Working conditions in the public system were unattractive to doctors who were leaving to join the private sector.

“So, we need to train more psychiatrists, get them to complete their studies in record time and then ensure we keep them in the state hospitals by creating an environment that is conducive to them staying.”

Before returning to KwaZulu-Natal, Chiliza served as an associate professor and senior psychiatrist at Stellenbosch University and Tygerberg Hospital.

Coming back to UKZN was like coming home, he says.

He completed his six years of undergraduate study at the university plus an extra four when he specialised in psychiatry.

“I am interested in academia, in leading academic institutions to do excellent work. I am really passionate about getting black

medical people to do their PhDs and research.

“By doing excellent work you create better services for our people.

“That’s why I am here; to lead this department by ensuring we produce black psychiatrists who are the best in their field.”

Although the province’s public psychiatric hospitals were in good condition overall, Chiliza said there was a need to revive the spirit of psychiatrists.

“What I have seen is there are many doctors in government hospitals who are very demoralised. I want to change that.

“There is a lot to be done to get the right number of psychiatrist into the right hospitals and working on inspiring projects.”

The Esidimeni tragedy happened when mentally ill patients cared for by the state were moved to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to cut costs.

Chiliza said he had not visited mental health NGOs in KwaZulu-



Professor Bonga Chiliza, the new head of psychiatry at the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine, is determined to encourage more doctors to become psychiatrists. PICTURE: LEON LESTRADE

Natal yet but his sense was that there were not enough places where mentally ill people could live.

“The majority of people with mental illnesses live at home, so we need to support their families by making sure that their nearest clinic has the right medication and that there is a sister or nurse who understands psychiatry at the clinic.

“Then, if there’s a problem, they can be referred to a doctor who has been trained in psychiatry.”

Chiliza hails from Umlazi and completed high school at Hilton College on a scholarship.

He was inspired to specialise in psychiatry as a fourth-year medical student.

“One of the first practical blocks I did in a hospital was psychiatry and I was fascinated.

“My interest was particularly on those who are seriously ill, what we call schizophrenia; I did my research on that.

“Schizophrenia often attacks people for the first time in their mid-20s, people who are doing well and studying.

“At Stellenbosch we worked to treat them as soon as possible to prevent deterioration.”

Mental illness usually develops

in a person where there is a family history of psychiatric issues, he says.

“We think one of the causes is genetic. For some it’s caused by substance abuse and for others it is caused by complications at birth but then develops at a later stage.”

As a PhD graduate, Chiliza has authored more than 50 peer reviewed articles and book chapters.