

# Mental health funds slow to just a trickle

Provincial policy leaves sufferers without care

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**O**NE IN 10 South Africans has HIV or Aids, but one in three will suffer from mental illness.

And yet, while HIV/Aids ranks in about 10 percent of the Gauteng Department of Health's budget, the money trail of what goes to mental health is often such a small trickle, it's difficult to follow.

On a Monday afternoon at the South African Depression and Anxiety Group's (Sadag) offices, the messages are coming in fast.

"I think I have some sort of depression and it's just getting worse and worse. Don't know what to do."

"I'm tired of living, I wish I could sleep forever."

"Please help me. I am contemplating killing my wife and two kids."

They get more than 400 of these calls a day.

Sadag runs South Africa's only suicide helpline, but says it gets no funding from the Department of Health for the work it does, despite being a 20-year-old organisation.

"Mental health affects a lot more people but does not get the same focus," said Sadag's operations director, Cassey Chambers.

"Mental health is a real medical illness, just like diabetes and hypertension."

Zamo Mbele, clinical psychologist at Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital, said: "As a mental health practitioner within the state, even there, there is a scarcity of professionals and resources. We are somewhat overburdened."

"When it comes to mental health, there doesn't seem to be a sufficient allocation of resources. Most people are not reached."

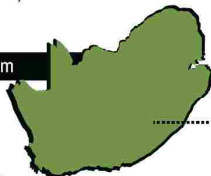
At the 2012 National Health Summit, Health Minister Aaron Mokoaleli described mental health services as fragmented, unfairly distributed and inadequately resourced.

According to the South African Stress and Health (SASH) study, published in 2009,

## HOW MENTAL DISORDERS AFFECT SOUTH AFRICA

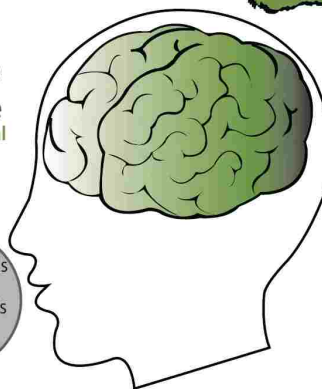
Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices.

**1 in 3** South Africans will or do suffer from a mental illness at some point in their life



**Only 25%** of people receive mental health care

Only 23 mental hospitals in the whole country, 18 beds per 100 000 people



According to the South African Stress and Health (SASH) study, prevalence rates of common mental disorders are significantly higher in South Africa than in any other World Mental Health-affiliated African country.

- There are 23 completed suicides each day in the country
- Youngest known suicide has been 7 years old
- 1 in 5 teens have attempted suicide at least once
- 9.5% of all teen deaths are due to suicide

Mental disorders accounted for 12% of the global burden of disease in 2000. This figure will rise to 15% in 2020, when it is estimated that depression will be the second most disabling health condition in the world (World Health Organisation 2001).

Graphic: Sithembile Mtolo  
Source: World Health Organisation

a staggering 75 percent of people who live with mental disorders do not receive the care they need.

And the facilities that exist continue to struggle to provide care.

Charlene Sunkel, communications officer at the Central Gauteng Mental Health Society, which runs a care facility for bipolar and schizophrenia patients, said delays in funding often caused major problems.

When Department of Health funding does not arrive, they are forced to cut down how much they feed patients, stop making phone calls and even stop going out because they can't afford the petrol.

Bharti Patel, director of the SA Federation for Mental Health, said the Mental Health Act was not backed up by funding.

He said a proper mental health framework and monitoring system were still in the pipeline.

This means that how money

is used at a provincial level can be down to personal preference and stigma within departments.

"For example, if I don't believe in mental health or that there is a mental illness, I'm not going to allocate services to it," Patel said.

A 2010 study found that only three of the nine provinces were able to report on expenditure on mental health care.

Mpumalanga led the provincial field, with 8 percent of its health budget spent on mental health.

Under-resourced provinces such as the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West and Northern Cape stand in stark contrast to relatively well-resourced provinces such as Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape.

The Department of Health had not responded to queries at the time of publication.

● Theresa Taylor is currently the recipient of the Pfizer Mental Health Journalism Fellowship