

2003

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Philip, Fausta

University of Dar es Salaam

Philip, F(2003)Stigma towards mental, illness: the experiences of mentally-ill patients and relatives attending the psychiatric unit, Muhimbili National Hospital.Master dissertation, University of Dar es Salaam, Dar es Salaam.

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Fausta Philip

Master of Medicine in Psychiatry

University of Dar es Salaam, College of natural and applied sciences, 2003

The types of study and objectives: A two-phased cross-sectional hospital based study was conducted at the Psychiatric unit Muhimbili National Hospital, between October 2001 and April 2002. The major aim of the study was to develop an operational framework for the concept of stigma towards mental illness and to use the framework to measure stigmatizing experiences amongst mentally ill patients and relatives of such patients. Methods: The first phase of the study used focus group discussions (FGDs) to access participants' knowledge, perceptions and community attitudes towards mental illnesses while focusing on specific themes of interest regarding the concept of stigma of mental Results: Transcription and interpretations of the FGD narratives were of note in understanding participants' knowledge, perceptions, manifestations, and experiences of stigma associated with mental illnesses. Both patients and relatives perceived mental illnesses as a major health problem in terms of magnitude, a propensity to affect youths, and the burden imposed to both sufferers and caregivers. The burden and disability associated with mental illnesses was identified as a basis for both self and enacted Conclusion: The methodological approach provided complimentary findings and a better understanding of the concept of social stigma associated with mental illness from the perspectives of persons with mental illness and relatives of the mentally ill. There was an obvious poverty of a language to speak about stigma as evidenced by the lack of a single descriptive Kiswahili word for the concept. The findings have implications for stigma reduction interventions in mental health care.