

Report on



Dr Samuel Paul Memorial Lecture 2020

Dr Vikram Patel

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**Reimagining Mental Health Care in
the Shadow of the Pandemic**

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Background

Public Affairs Centre (PAC) organised the **3rd Dr Samuel Paul Memorial Lecture 2020**. The lecture titled, "Reimagining mental health care in the shadow of the pandemic" was delivered by Dr. Vikram Patel, Professor, Department of Global Health and Population, Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health and Co-Founder and Member of Managing Committee, Sangath.



Gurucharan G, Director, PAC welcomed Dr A. Ravindra, Chairman Public Affairs Centre, Dr Vikram Patel, the Distinguished Speaker for the day, all the audience.

He began by stating that PAC is honoured that Dr Vikram Patel, a distinguished teacher and practitioner and a Professor of Global Health at the Harvard Medical School, will be delivering this year's Dr Samuel Paul Memorial Lecture and stated "*on behalf of the Public Affairs Centre, it is my privilege to welcome him*".

Gurucharan G set the context to the topic of the lecture by saying that we live in remarkably difficult times. COVID - 19 has compelled us to reflect on the fundamental questions intrinsic to the nature of life itself – morbidity, ageing, and mortality – and the imperative of the unending human quest for knowledge and meaning.

There is no more important a need than to understand better how the pandemic has affected mind and matter; and no more distinguished expert than Dr Vikram Patel to enlighten us. He introduced Dr A. Ravindra, Chairman, Public Affairs Centre who delivered the Inaugural Address. He added that besides being a distinguished civil servant, Dr Ravindra is an expert on urbanisation. More recently his research interests have been on the problems of ageing and care of the elderly in urban centres.

Gurucharan G added that like all transformational institutions, the Public Affairs Centre was founded by Dr Samuel Paul in 1994, on a simple idea – that of holding the state to account, through citizen engagement. He added that Social Accountability is often reduced to a transactional process and spoken of in a narrow context of service delivery by government. This diminishes the transformational power of the concept of social accountability and its potential multiplier effect for a step change in society.

What sets the Public Affairs Centre apart is that it strives, in all its endeavours, to go beyond these narrow confines. We at PAC recognise social accountability as a process at the intersection of a live democracy, the demands of a plural society, and the commitment to a liberal and progressive world view. The annual Dr Samuel Paul Memorial Lecture is our tribute to the man, his vision and the institution that he founded. For all of us at PAC, it is also a reminder that we must, at all times, speak truth

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to power, if we aspire to leave the world better than we found it. He concluded by thanking all for joining the event.

Dr Ravindra A, Chairman, Public Affairs Centre, delivered the Inaugural Address by welcoming Dr. Vikam Patel, G. Gurucharan and all the attendees. He reminisced on his early days at PAC where, on the request of Dr. Paul, he joined as a Board Member, post his retirement as the Chief Secretary to the Government of Karnataka. He said *“today, I look back with pride and a deep sense of satisfaction. PAC is 26 years old, and has carved out a niche in civil society as an independent, evidence-based, and credible action research think-tank. Credit for this, in substantial measure, goes to Dr Samuel Paul, in whose honour we have gathered in virtual mode today”*.



He added that he had known Dr Paul as erudite, soft-spoken, and an academic of outstanding credentials who had served with distinction both in India and abroad. *“Yet, it was only in my close engagement with him, as a member of the Board of PAC, that I began to recognise that he was in its truest sense a good citizen, and one who wanted to be part of the solution than of the problem. It was with growing admiration that I saw the remarkable vision and the untiring commitment of Dr Samuel Paul to promote good public governance in India”*.

He added that well before the concept of social accountability came into public discourse, Dr Paul had recognised that the principal stakeholders - the citizens and civil society - have an important role in the path towards a just and humane society. The relevance of his approach has gained greater salience more recently, and highlighted in the UN 2030 agenda that is circumscribed by the principle ‘leave no one behind’.

As PAC turns 26, and the world confronts one of its biggest public health challenges, we are staring at changing paradigms. Two key challenges are re-emerging in our society:

1. Inequality-in the real world, there is no single homogenous group that one might describe as ‘the community’. Instead, there are communities within communities with conflicting interests and competing demands. If there is one fact that has emerged from the economic and social disruption that COVID-19 has brought in its wake, it is that the brunt of the burden of this pandemic has been borne by the disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. For them it has simply been a question of choosing between life or livelihoods.
2. Resource-constraints in public health system in the country due to COVID-19. In practice, this has resulted in several of the essential health services like immunisation of children, ante-natal care, and geriatric care being crowded out affecting women, children and the ageing populations, perhaps with longer term consequences.

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He concluded by saying that, “*In this backdrop, we need to understand how as communities we can best respond to the pandemic, how we might together mitigate the adverse effects of this pandemic and others that might emerge in the future. The less visible, less known, but more important impact of COVID-19 has been on mental health*”.

He welcomed Dr. Vikram Patel by stating that “it is befitting, therefore, that we have an exceptional scholar and mental health expert, Dr Vikram Patel delivering this year’s Dr Samuel Paul Memorial Lecture”



Dr. Meena Nair, Head-Research, PAC introduced Dr. Patel by stating that Dr. Patel holds an MBBS and a PhD, he is The Pershing Square Professor of Global Health in the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School. In addition, he is an Adjunct Professor and Joint Director at the Centre for Chronic Conditions and Injuries at the Public Health Foundation of India, honorary professor at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (where he co-founded the Centre for Global Mental Health in 2008). He is a co-founder of Sangath, an Indian NGO which won the MacArthur Foundation’s International Prize for Creative and Effective Institutions in 2008 and the WHO Public Health Champion of India award in 2016.

Adding several other accolades in his professional career, Dr. Meena concluded by stating that Dr. Patel was a member of a group constituted by the Ministry of Health of the Government of India, tasked with writing India's first mental health policy and designing the National Mental Health Programme for the period of 2012-17. His work on the burden of mental disorders, their association with poverty and social disadvantage, and the use of community resources for the delivery of interventions for their prevention and treatment. He has several feathers in his cap to include, receiving the Chalmers Medal from the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, UK, the Sarnat medal from the US National Academy of Medicine, an honorary doctorate from Georgetown University, the Pardes Humanitarian Prize from the Brain & Behaviour Research Foundation, an honorary OBE from the UK Government and the Posey Leadership Award from Austin College. He was listed in TIME Magazine’s 100 most influential persons of the year in 2015.

She concluded by stating that Dr. Patel’s research has galvanised policy, civil society, and donor action to address the large unmet need for care for people with mental disorders, both in low-and middle-income countries and in low-resourced contexts of high-income countries.

Dr. Vikram Patel began the lecture by stating that he was privileged to deliver the Dr. Samuel Paul Memorial Lecture 2020.

He began by stating that when most people think of the words ‘mental health’, they think of mental illness. But mental health is much more than that. Indeed, mental health defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as “*a state of well-being in which the*

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individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community". Mental health is a personal asset, important to each individual at every moment of their lives. It covers a range of human experiences, at the heart of which is the *trimurti* of thoughts, feelings and behaviours. It can range from positive at the one end to impaired at the other. But we only become aware of our mental health when it is impaired.



When mental health is impaired in a sustained way, for example for two weeks or more, then the person may be affected by a mental health problem which is distinguished from everyday ups and downs by three features: the extent to which different aspects of our mental health is affected; the duration and the impact on our daily lives.

THE NEED

India's NMHS: Mental health problems leading causes of suffering, affecting about 10 of the population >`100 million; Suicide was a leading cause of death in young adults and people with mental health problems died earlier than they should; Profound levels of discrimination and abuses of human rights, with incarceration, and denial of fundamental rights to dignity, freedom and access to care; Despite strong evidence of CE of a range of interventions, >90% treatment gap; Only about 1% of funds spent on mental health and most of this was devoted to mental hospitals which account for ¾ of all psychiatric beds in India.

This was the situation BEFORE Covid! The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has put health systems around the world to their sternest test ever. This time, the crisis will be much, much greater and will affect vast swathes of the global population. Indeed, mental health has never been so central to our lives, second only in health worries to the virus itself.

Mental health has become a key concern both because of the direct impact of the virus, and also a consequence of the reaction of the media and governments to the epidemic. If one considers the loss of loved ones, fear of infection, loss of employment, constant uncertainty about when, if ever, life will return to normal and the torrent of mixed messages about the science (real or fake) around the virus, it is not at all surprising that experiences of anxiety, sleep problems, irritability and feelings of hopelessness have become widespread. They are mostly rational responses of our minds to the extraordinary realities that we are facing.

Minimal data from India, but a nationwide online cross-sectional survey study recruited 10,067 individuals covering all 64 districts in Bangladesh via social media (April 1-10, 2020). The prevalence rate of depression and suicidal ideation related to COVID-19 was 33% and 5%%.

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We might be looking ahead to a further rise in the burden of clinically significant mental health problems due to the impact of the economic recession, the widening of inequalities in countries, the continuing uncertainties about future waves of the epidemic and the physical distancing policies begin to bite deeper into our mental health. This would not be surprising, given the strong association between unemployment, acute poverty and indebtedness with poor mental health. “Deaths of despair” have been documented as the cause for the increased mortality and reduction in life expectancy in working-age Americans following the economic recession in 2008. Suicide and substance use related mortality accounted for most of these deaths. India shares the ills of US society, from profound inequality to weak social security net and fragmented health care systems; in addition, India is also home to the largest number of poor people in the world, already enfeebled by hunger and myriad diseases of poverty. This toxic combination of absolute poverty with rising levels of inequality is a recipe for a similar surge of depths of despair in the region.

TWO KEY GROUPS: WOMEN, YOUNG PEOPLE, PLMI

SMI care: data from other countries shows a massive disruption in care, higher risks of people with mental health problems acquiring COVID and vice versa, and higher mortality in people who suffer from both.

CURRENT RESPONSE

Mental health care systems will be ill-equipped to deal with this surge, not only because of the paucity of skilled providers, but also because of the narrow biomedical models which dominate mental health care.

3D: leading to low demand



While there has been a flourishing of initiatives to address the rising tide of mental health problems, most notably through telemedicine platforms, these suffer from the same barriers that have so limited the coverage of mental health care in the past: most rely on specialist providers who are very scarce in number using narrow biomedical models which are unsuited for population mental health. This is compounded by yet another barrier: digital literacy and adequate internet connectivity still remains a distant goal for large swathes of our people, particularly amongst the poor and rural populations. Still, one welcome aspect of this development is the recognition of the possibility of remote delivery and the value of psychological therapies, often ignored in mental health care and, at best, playing a poor cousin to medication options.

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WAY FORWARD

He emphasised that there is much each of us can do to promote mental health and address psychological distress.

Be aware of and acknowledge your mental health, as much as you do your physical health. Feeling irritable for no reason should be as important to you as feeling pain in your chest. It's OK to not be OK!

1. Talk to someone, anyone you feel comfortable with, for “its ok to talk”, sharing one’s story about mental health is not only a powerful way to feel better, but is also the most effective strategy to reduce stigma
2. Do something for others, for science has shown that care-giving and community service not only makes your life more rewarding, but also longer. Compassion is not just charity but serves you the MOST. Relatedly, relationships, not the number but their quality, matter enormously.
3. Insulate yourself against the uncertainty by reminding yourself that all of humanity is being buffeted by the same rough seas and, even if some of us travel in yachts, the overwhelming majority of us will safely reach the shore. Limit your worrying about the future by focusing your mind and thoughts on the present. Feel and enjoy the now and never lose hope.
4. Meditate, it doesn’t matter what type of meditation you choose, including prayer, all of them share similar characteristics, notably to focus one’s attention away from external sensations and to calm oneself by focusing on our breath or inner sensations
5. Seek help from a professional if your distress is persistent and coming in the way of getting things done

He then spoke on the role of Sangath, where he is a co-founder. Sangath is based in Goa and has been working in several states for the past 25 years. He added that the role of Sangath and several global health research organisations has generated a range of innovative strategies aimed at addressing the structural barriers to the scaling up of mental health care, redefining the who, what, how and where of these therapies and demonstrating it can be delivered anywhere, even where there is no mental health professional.

He added that the more recent innovations seeking to scale up these approaches demonstrate the acceptability and effectiveness of digital training of ASHA workers in the delivery of psychological treatments and of peer supervision for quality assurance. This range of innovations, when combined and scaled up, can transform access to one of the most effective interventions in medicine.

He mentioned that this is exactly the goal of the EMPOWER programme, an initiative of Harvard Medical School and Sangath which is seeking to scale up evidence based on psychological therapies, with an initial implementation focus on communities in the

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USA and India and a focus on three competencies: assessment of mental health, and management of acute crises and depression. Ultimately, this platform will offer a career path which enables front-line providers an opportunity to achieve the status of an expert, motivating them and ensuring sustainability of the most expensive mental health professional resource. The use of digital platforms for building the workforce is not only aligned with the use of tele-medicine but also with the urgent need for digital approaches for training and supervision in the light of physical distancing policies.

He then spoke on the need for resources to realise the audacious transformation and the need to anticipate the biggest threat to mental health consequent to COVID-19: the pushing back, once again, of mental health from the global health agenda. He recalled this happening way back in the late 1990s when it appeared that mental health would finally be recognised as a priority by the world's leading development agencies only for it to be left off the table by the Millennium Development Goals of 2000. Fifteen years later, mental health found its rightful place in the Sustainable Development Goals. Now we are in the first half of 2020 and once again, mental health risks are being shoved back into the shadows.

He concluded by stating that mental health problems were already a leading cause of suffering and the most neglected health issue globally before the pandemic. The pandemic will, through worsening the social determinants of mental health, fuel a worsening of this crisis. This presents a historic opportunity to reimagine the traditional approaches to mental health care, by scaling up the science which demonstrates the need to recognize mental health as a global public good, important to all people in all countries, especially young people and central to the concept of human capital. Above all, science emphasises the need to embrace the diversity of experiences and interventions to address this crisis.



S.S. Iyer, Head-Finance and Administration, PAC delivered the Vote of Thanks by stating that, *"it has been an educative session by Dr Vikram Patel on the issues concerning mental health especially due to COVID-19 pandemic"*.

At the outset we are grateful to Dr Vikram Patel for taking time from his busy schedule and delivering the Dr. Samuel Paul memorial lecture. We also thank all of you for attending the Dr. Samuel Paul memorial lecture and look forward to your support to all events and activities of Public Affairs Centre. We thank the media for disseminating all our events and hope that they will continue to support us in future also.

To watch the complete lecture log on to <https://youtu.be/zaGJd4So7eU>



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