

AI delivers mental health services to children and youth

Worldwide about 10-20% of children and youth experience mental disorders. However, it is often difficult to determine the causes behind these conditions, disorders and diseases. Research shows that there are several barriers, such as a diminished civil society support, a lack of global consensus on mental illness and its treatment, missed policy opportunities and limited evidence on the delivery of interventions.



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Neuropsychiatric conditions are often the leading cause of disability in young people in all regions. If untreated, these conditions severely influence children's development, their educational attainments and their potential to live fulfilling and productive lives, says Professor Jace Pillay, the South African Research Chair in Education and Care in Childhood at the University of Johannesburg (UJ).

To support an approach in understanding and meeting needs of mental healthcare of children and youth, Pillay and his research team together with the Gauteng Premier's Office, have introduced a web-based child and youth mental health profiling system, using rapid real-time 4IR technologies. The system will be rolled out in all Gauteng-based schools.

"Aligned to the fourth industrial revolution (IR) this system has the capability to test from both the online and offline environments enabling researchers and all stakeholders or data consumers to commission and/or receive research evidence or draw data at a click of a button, for example on child and youth depression, anxiety, stress, suicidal tendencies, etc. The need for such a research project is clearly evident in the escalating school, gender and community based violence prevalent in our country – much of which are linked to mental health challenges," says Pillay.

He points out it is envisaged that this system would assist in the investigation of the prevalence of child and mental health problems across age, gender, race, and socio-economic status. "This will enable us to make a comparative analysis of mental health problems across education districts, specific locations, and across provinces lending support for what type of interventions are needed in specific places. Additionally, risk and resilience factors that contribute to the mental health of children and youth will be investigated.

Avoiding another Esidimeni

"Based on the findings guidelines for the development of mental health supportive programmes will be made to strengthen the mental well-being and social support systems of children and youth who experience mental health difficulties in their

schools, families and communities. Undoubtedly, this will assist in reducing school dropouts and mental problems that persist into adulthood so we do not witness a repetition of the Esidemeni crisis."

"The use of technologies plays a major role in the delivery of mental health services and supports to children and youth in providing prevention, assessment, diagnosis, counselling and treatment programmes. Strategies are growing exponentially on a global basis, thus it is critical to study the impact of these technologies on child and youth mental health service delivery. An in-depth review and synthesis of the quality of findings of studies on effectiveness of the use of technologies in service delivery are also warranted. A full systematic review would provide that opportunity."

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