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## Reconceptualising the treatment gap for common mental disorders: A fork in the road for global mental health?

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Abstract:	In this analysis, we argue that the "treatment gap" for common mental disorders primarily reflects lack of demand, arising because services fail to address the needs of disadvantaged communities. We propose a route forward for global mental health, with explicit focus on action on the socio-economic determinants of psychological suffering.

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# 1 **Reconceptualising the treatment gap for common mental** 2 **disorders: A fork in the road for global mental health?**

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16

## 17 **Summary**

18 In this analysis, we argue that the “treatment gap” for common mental disorders often  
19 reflects lack of demand, arising because services fail to address the needs of disadvantaged  
20 communities. We propose a route forward for global mental health, with explicit focus on  
21 action on the socio-economic determinants of psychological suffering.

## 22 **The treatment gap for common mental disorders**

23 The way we respond to a problem is shaped by how we frame and describe it. The  
24 treatment gap is defined as the proportion of people who meet diagnostic criteria for a  
25 given disorder whose condition is untreated (1). This concept, anchored to the twin claims  
26 that mental disorders are highly prevalent and that mental health services are scarce, has  
27 been a central tenet of the discipline of global mental health (GMH). Treatment gaps  
28 ranging from 82% to 98% have been reported for common mental disorders (2) (CMD),  
29 with these figures typically higher among communities that are marginalised or have fewer  
30 resources.

31

32 The 2007 and 2011 Lancet GMH series (3, 4) argued that the central mission of the field is  
33 to scale up evidence-based care in order to “close the treatment gap” for mental disorders,  
34 of which the most prevalent are CMD (defined as depression, anxiety and somatoform  
35 disorders). These arguments are mirrored in key WHO publications, which place “closing  
36 the treatment gap” front and centre of international mental health policy (5). Recent  
37 literature demonstrates how pervasive this concept continues to be in shaping the

38 narrative of the field, with many articles still framing findings in terms of the treatment gap  
39 for mental disorders (6).

40

41 However, there has been much critique of the evidence base for this gap, from arguments  
42 that the measures used ignore important local variation in conceptualisations of mental  
43 distress (7), to those that draw attention to the broader needs of people with mental  
44 illnesses (8). In response, the 2018 Lancet Commission (9), replaced “treatment gap” with  
45 the “care gap”, referring to the unmet mental health, physical health, and social care needs  
46 of people with mental illness (8). However, we contend that maintaining the notion of a  
47 ‘gap’ misses a more fundamental point: Why do so few people access mental health  
48 treatment? And how does this influence how we conceptualise solutions to the lack of  
49 service uptake?

50

51 In this analysis, we consider a frequently-overlooked contributor to the treatment gap: low  
52 demand for services arising from non-medical interpretations of CMD-related experiences -  
53 and its implications for how we respond to the needs of people who are considered to  
54 suffer from CMD. Our arguments are written from the position of allyship or lived  
55 experiences of adversity; three of our authors are born in, or direct descendants from  
56 communities who face the structural determinants of poor mental health that are largely  
57 overlooked in this field. All authors have devoted their academic careers to advancing  
58 arguments that create meaningful space for the contexts of mental health to be taken  
59 more seriously. We argue that while providing appropriate services that consider the social  
60 and economic realities of people’s lives is essential, global mental health must also advance  
61 a movement for improved public mental health measures targeting the structural and  
62 political determinants of mental health.

63

64 Our focus in the current piece is on CMD because this is frequently the target of GMH  
65 initiatives, and the majority of people in the “mental health treatment gap” are those  
66 considered to have CMD. Some of our argument will apply to other categories of mental  
67 disorder but exploring the extent to which it does is beyond the scope of this analysis.

68

## 69 Supply or demand?

70 The treatment gap is often taken to indicate a shortage of mental health services; in other  
71 words, a problem of supply, supported by evidence of resource deficits for mental health  
72 care. This is used to justify focusing on increasing access to mental health services,  
73 particularly in settings where resources are most scarce.

74

75 However, there is also evidence to suggest an alternative interpretation. The World Mental  
76 Health Surveys, conducted in 24 countries with 63,678 participants, found that *lack of*  
77 *perceived need for treatment* was by far the most frequently-reported reason given for not  
78 seeking treatment for mental health problems (10). This is consistent with the hypothesis  
79 that many people who fall in the “treatment gap” do not want treatment for their  
80 depression or anxiety symptoms. This alternative interpretation (the treatment gap as a  
81 demand rather than supply issue) was borne out in the PRIME programme – an eight-year  
82 initiative to increase the supply of mental health services in five low- and middle-income  
83 countries – which demonstrated that, in the absence of demand, increasing the supply of  
84 mental health services does not reduce the treatment gap for CMD (11). However,  
85 explaining the reasons behind the lack of demand for mental health services has received  
86 scant attention in the global mental health literature.

87

## 88 Why is demand for mental health care so low?

89

90 Low demand for mental health services is typically attributed to stigma, barriers to access  
 91 such as travel costs, limited “mental health awareness”, or limited service provision (9).  
 92 While these may contribute to low service uptake, our research offers a simpler  
 93 explanation that has received less attention. Our findings indicate that across multiple low-  
 94 resource settings in both the global north and south, people fail to seek mental health  
 95 services – and disengage from services – because people interpret their psychological and  
 96 emotional states as reactions to social and economic problems, not as health conditions  
 97 that can be addressed by medical services. Similar findings have been reported in both low-  
 98 and middle-income countries and among marginalised groups in high-income settings.

99

100 Below we summarise findings from four qualitative studies (12-15).

101

102 Table 1. Summary of qualitative research from India, Mexico, Uganda and

103 the UK exploring reasons for low engagement with mental health services for

104 CMD.

105

Context	Services offered for CMD	Key themes	Illustrative quotes
Rural India, with high rates of poverty. Most participants did manual agricultural labour, often for very low daily wages in poor conditions, with little security. Many women complained of mistreatment and alcoholism by their husbands. Limited access to quality health care, and low life expectancy.	Mental health services based on mhGAP model provided in community health centres across the sub-district, including both pharmacological treatment and brief psychological interventions.	CMD conceptualised in terms of “tension” or stress arising from poverty and other stressors.  Participants did not believe that health services could relieve these feelings because they cannot change their economic or social circumstances.	“What else can a poor man have except tension [stress]... Money is the issue. We have no money in our home. If I had money then all of my tension would be ended.”  “[The doctor] can’t provide bread to your home. When your hunger is ended then your mind will become fine.”
Rural villages in Mexico, located in a mountainous and remote area, with very limited access to internet and no mobile networks. Low availability to employment, health services, and other basic services (e.g. water, electricity). High rates of	Mental health services based on mhGAP model provided in primary care facilities and at the community, including both pharmacological treatment and brief	CMD symptoms attributed to adversities experienced.  High rates of disengagement from services, explained in terms of services not being helpful since they address	“This is why I get ill. I worry about my son’s drinking.”

<p>extreme poverty (i.e. family income insufficient to cover basic needs), alcohol misuse and family violence.</p>	<p>psychological interventions.</p>	<p>only symptoms, not causes.</p>	
<p>Refugee settlement in Northern Uganda, in which food and basic needs are frequently unmet. Self-reliance is encouraged, but land and other economic resources available to refugees are scarce. Most people live in chronic poverty, with little hope to sustain themselves and their family or to gain independence from the already inadequate humanitarian assistance.</p>	<p>Brief form of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT-T); pharmacological treatment.</p>	<p>CMD explained as 'overthinking' due to lack of food, inability to afford medication when family members are sick, and other socio-economic hardships.</p> <p>Frustration with mental health services that ignore refugees' primary concerns.</p> <p>Futility of psychological intervention when basic needs unmet.</p>	<p>"The medicine cannot do anything to me to have less thoughts; I will only have less thoughts when I can support my children."</p> <p>"These people, they come here and they tell us not to think, to forget about the past. But how can you tell us to forget when you are not giving us anything to support ourselves? We have no work. The food is little. You are just fooling us."</p>
<p>Black African and Caribbean young people in central London, UK, who live in contexts of economic precarity, over-policing, and increased risks of exposure to traumatic life events. During the pandemic young people's exposure to precarity was heightened.</p>	<p>Increased access to online support groups.</p> <p>Increased resources for school-based mental health support provision.</p>	<p>CMD symptoms linked to social consequences of the pandemic.</p> <p>Frustration with a lack of understanding by government of the stresses young people face.</p> <p>Desire to lead their own responses; and to be trusted by authorities in doing so.</p>	<p>"It's a lot. It's like over a pound when I get on the bus... But it's just stress."</p> <p>"I'm fed up [with] thinking they're (the government) going to help - they're not going to help. They don't care, we are not a priority to them, they have their own people, and they don't care."</p>

106

107

108 The research cited above adds to the evidence base that decontextualized approaches to  
 109 mental health treatment make little sense to people whose psychological distress is linked  
 110 with ongoing adversity. By ignoring the social determinants that frequently cause  
 111 psychological distress, mental health services often fail to meet people's perceived needs,  
 112 resulting in low uptake and high drop-out rates when these services are rolled out, despite

113 positive results in trials. Many people do not believe that psychological or pharmacological  
114 treatment will make them feel better if their basic needs remain unmet. Indeed, “feeling  
115 better” on its own is rarely people’s primary goal, when understood solely as a  
116 psychological experience; to feel better, people need to see real change in their  
117 circumstances.

118

119 To be clear, we are not advocating the abandonment of mental health treatment.  
120 However, to ensure demand for services, community concerns and potential solutions  
121 must be central to the design and delivery of mental health programmes. This can be  
122 achieved through participatory action research or co-production with potential service  
123 users (16). However, this may require a fundamental re-think of interventions and their  
124 method of implementation: the resulting interventions may not look like mental health  
125 services as conceptualised by the health sector (see box 1).

126

### 127 Don’t we just need more mental health awareness?

128 With low mental health literacy often blamed for low demand for mental health services,  
129 efforts to raise awareness have been increasingly mainstreamed in mental health  
130 programmes. Calls for awareness campaigns to change the community’s current  
131 understanding of CMD may be misguided, however, not only because the principles of  
132 person-centred care recommend listening to patients and adapting services to their needs  
133 (rather than convincing patients that their needs should match the services offered), but  
134 also because a growing evidence base suggests that people facing ongoing adversity are  
135 indeed less likely to respond to treatment, in the absence of a change in their  
136 circumstances. Two recent systematic reviews provide preliminary evidence that both  
137 psychological and pharmacological treatments for depression are less effective for people  
138 living in greater deprivation (17, 18). Most of the evidence reviewed was from high-income  
139 countries, but in a CMD intervention trial in Goa, participants facing major current life  
140 problems were also far more likely to remain depressed despite treatment (19).

141

142 Given the extensive evidence on the social determinants of mental health, it should be  
143 unsurprising that trying to improve patients’ mental health while the causes of the problem  
144 are ongoing frequently fails. Treating people and sending them back to the same conditions  
145 that made them sick is a Sisyphean task. This may go some way towards explaining the lack  
146 of association observed between mental health service coverage and prevalence of CMD  
147 (20).

148

### 149 A route forward for Global Mental Health

150

151 Arguments thus far illuminate why a treatment gap is a poor measure of unmet need, and  
152 GMH must move beyond “closing the treatment gap” – at least for CMD – as its primary  
153 goal. While there is a human rights case for improving access to and quality of mental  
154 health care for those who want to use formal services, scaling up these services without  
155 wider social and economic measures will not necessarily reduce the overall burden of  
156 mental ill health (20). We need upstream approaches, including social and economic  
157 interventions to reduce the causes of mental ill health, to make a meaningful impact on  
158 population mental health, especially for deprived or marginalised communities. In other  
159 words, in addition to a health sector response, we require a societal response to the causes  
160 of CMD that lie beyond the health sector.

161



162 We therefore propose an explicit distinction between two separate agendas in GMH, based  
163 on distinct rationales:

164

165 (1) Service improvement, based on human rights, co-production, and quality  
166 improvement principles.

167 (2) A prevention agenda to reduce the population burden of mental disorders through  
168 action on the social, structural, and political determinants of mental health  
169 (reflecting the explanatory models of people who attribute their CMD symptoms to  
170 their social and economic circumstances).

171

172 Importantly, these recommendations apply not only to low- and middle-income countries  
173 but also to high-income settings, particularly for marginalised groups who are most  
174 negatively affected by the structural determinants of mental health, and who are least  
175 likely to access formal mental health care.

176

177

### 178 *(1) Reforming services*

179

180 The development of effective and culturally appropriate interventions for CMD that can be  
181 implemented in low-resource settings, such as the Thinking Healthy intervention in  
182 Pakistan (21), or the Friendship Bench in Zimbabwe (22), has been an important step  
183 towards providing appropriate support to people experiencing CMD symptoms. However,  
184 the limits of what these interventions can achieve in the absence of social and economic  
185 change must be acknowledged, as well as the disparity between the service that is  
186 delivered in randomised controlled trials and that which is typically delivered in routine  
187 services to those who seek help for CMD.

188

189 While the GMH agenda has placed great emphasis on expanding services to reach all those  
190 who meet diagnostic criteria for CMD, many of whom do not consider themselves to need  
191 or want such treatment, the quality of care received by the minority of those who do seek  
192 treatment – typically those with more severe symptoms – is still frequently poor. We  
193 contend that rather than “closing the treatment gap” through identifying more non-  
194 treatment-seeking individuals with CMD, improving the quality of care for those who  
195 currently seek help should be a priority.

196

197 Poor quality healthcare and struggling health systems limit the extent to which it is possible  
198 to deliver effective interventions to those with CMD, particularly those living in vulnerable  
199 situations (23). Basic issues such as lack of health personnel, inadequate facilities and  
200 shortage of medications still affect a large proportion of the world’s population and make it  
201 extremely difficult to offer person-centred care through health services. To fulfil the right  
202 to health for all, we need health systems that are adequately resourced and designed to  
203 address contextual challenges. Persuading more people to seek help for CMD when health  
204 services are unable to provide quality care may be counter-productive; our first priority  
205 should be to advocate for investment in systems strengthening so that those who do  
206 receive treatment receive high quality and dignified care.

207

208 Furthermore, our goal in terms of increasing access to services must be not only that the  
209 human right to care is met, but also that people have the ability to improve their lives in  
210 ways they consider meaningful. Achieving the above is only possible through actively  
211 involving communities and those who seek care in the design and evaluation of services  
212 and working collaboratively to build solutions with the families and communities that these



213 services serve (16). Such methods ensure greater attention to demand-side barriers –  
 214 which are often strongly inter-linked with the social and economic contexts of people’s  
 215 lives – to create services that people want to engage with.

216

217

218

219 *A case study from Burans of incorporating social and economic considerations into*  
 220 *interventions for CMD.*

221

222 Rajini is a woman in her thirties who lives in a slum near the bustling tourist town  
 223 of Mussoorie in Northern India. As the daughter of a single mother, who is the sole  
 224 breadwinner in the family, they are barely making ends meet. Rajini was diagnosed  
 225 with CMD and has been confined to her house for most of her adult life due to  
 226 these difficulties.

227

228 A Burans community worker worked with the pair for 4 months, not only looking at  
 229 the biomedical aspect of recovery, but also working through the social aspects,  
 230 including keeping busy and trusting her with responsibilities. Rajini was enrolled in  
 231 a 3 month recovery-oriented care plan. Alongside counselling, the community  
 232 worker contacted a chicken vendor, with the idea that caring for chickens would  
 233 give Rajini purpose while easing the financial burden of the family.

234

235 This simple and sustainable program has shown surprising results. Rajini gets up  
 236 early every day, freshens up, and takes care of the chicks. Her mother says; ‘If each  
 237 hen gives one egg every 3 days at 10-15 rupees per egg, then we will have a  
 238 supplementary income. The best part of this has been seeing my daughter take up  
 239 this responsibility. I never thought I would see this day.’

240

241 This story of change has helped the Burans team realise the importance of  
 242 livelihoods interventions to support families, but also the impact of working on  
 243 social determinants to improve mental health, apart from the biomedical services  
 244 available.

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## (2) Upstream interventions to tackle social determinants of mental health

While good-quality treatment for the minority who want it is important, when it comes to the extensive “social suffering” (16) experienced by many people with CMD, individual-level treatment is not the answer to failed social systems. Improving population mental health will require improvements in the social conditions that give rise to social suffering. This is referred to as tackling the “prevention gap” (9), but has thus far received scant attention in the GMH literature. We contend that this stream of GMH requires far greater concerted efforts than it has received to date. It is through this stream, by contributing to collective efforts to advocate for structural changes, that substantive gains can be made in reducing the mental health burden of populations.

In this editorial we make clear the need to bring intervention efforts more in line with voiced concerns of people living through adversity globally. Elsewhere we have suggested models to bring us closer to a field where upstream and downstream approaches work in parallel to respond to social determinants of poor mental health (16, 24). We welcome recent modelling and quantitative evidence that confirms what has been said for decades

264 by the people who live through adversity and seek to maintain good mental health; that  
265 the socio-structural conditions of everyday life matter.

266

267 The evidence base for the mental health impact of policies and interventions to address  
268 social determinants originates disproportionately from high-income settings in Western  
269 Europe, North America and Australasia, and public mental health research is urgently  
270 needed that is relevant to other contexts. This will require a different set of research tools  
271 to those traditionally employed in GMH, since upstream interventions are not always  
272 amenable to randomised controlled trials.

273

## 274 Conclusion

275

276 In summary, we believe that “closing the treatment gap” for CMD should be revised as a  
277 goal of global mental health. We maintain that recent evidence suggests that the treatment  
278 gap for CMD also reflects lack of demand for mental health care because symptoms are  
279 explained in social or economic terms, mirroring known social determinants of mental  
280 health. A growing evidence base also suggests that people with CMD who face adversity  
281 are right to doubt the utility of treatment without a change in their social or economic  
282 circumstances. Providing interventions that address people’s mental health needs is central  
283 to global mental health, but “treatment” per se does not necessarily meet these needs. We  
284 must therefore expand the notion of what constitutes a mental health intervention. It is  
285 important to acknowledge two divergent agendas within global mental health – (a) public  
286 mental health, and (b) increasing access to and quality of healthcare – which require  
287 different skills, strategies, stakeholders and research agendas. We contend that greater  
288 transparency about these two parallel streams, and support for the often overlooked public  
289 mental health field, is necessary for the field to progress.

290

## 291 Declaration of interests

292 None.

293

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## 298 Data availability

299 This is an analysis rather than an original research article, so no new data are reported. The  
300 research referenced in Table 1 is reported elsewhere and the supporting data from these  
301 studies are available upon reasonable request from TR, GME, CT and RAB, respectively.

302

## 303 Author contributions

304 TR, GME and CT conceptualised the analysis and TR was responsible for drafting the  
305 manuscript. PP, AC and RAB subsequently provided critical feedback and suggested edits  
306 and additions to the text. TR, GME, CT, PP and RAB all provided illustrative examples of the  
307 phenomenon discussed from their own research.

308

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- 371

For Peer Review

Table 1. Summary of qualitative research from India, Mexico, Uganda and the UK exploring reasons for low engagement with mental health services for CMD.

Context	Services offered for CMD	Key themes	Illustrative quotes
Rural India, with high rates of poverty. Most participants did manual agricultural labour, often for very low daily wages in poor conditions, with little security. Many women complained of mistreatment and alcoholism by their husbands. Limited access to quality health care, and low life expectancy.	Mental health services based on mhGAP model provided in community health centres across the sub-district, including both pharmacological treatment and brief psychological interventions.	CMD conceptualised in terms of “tension” or stress arising from poverty and other stressors.  Participants did not believe that health services could relieve these feelings because they cannot change their economic or social circumstances.	“What else can a poor man have except tension [stress]... Money is the issue. We have no money in our home. If I had money then all of my tension would be ended.”  “[The doctor] can’t provide bread to your home. When your hunger is ended then your mind will become fine.”
Rural villages in Mexico, located in a mountainous and remote area, with very limited access to internet and no mobile networks. Low availability to employment, health services, and other basic services (e.g. water, electricity). High rates of extreme poverty (i.e. family income insufficient to cover basic needs), alcohol misuse and family violence.	Mental health services based on mhGAP model provided in primary care facilities and at the community, including both pharmacological treatment and brief psychological interventions.	CMD symptoms attributed to adversities experienced.  High rates of disengagement from services, explained in terms of services not being helpful since they address only symptoms, not causes.	“This is why I get ill. I worry about my son’s drinking.”
Refugee settlement in Northern Uganda, in which food and basic needs are frequently unmet. Self-reliance is encouraged, but land and other economic resources available to refugees are scarce. Most people live in	Brief form of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT-T); pharmacological treatment.	CMD explained as ‘overthinking’ due to lack of food, inability to afford medication when family members are sick, and other socio-economic hardships.	“The medicine cannot do anything to me to have less thoughts; I will only have less thoughts when I can support my children.”  “These people, they come here and they tell us not to think, to forget about the past. But how can you tell