“Witchcraft” beliefs and mental health

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Mental wellbeing

• Successful performance of mental functions in terms of
  – Thoughts
  – Emotions
  – Perception (the way we “see” and “feel” the world)
  – Behaviour

• Such that one is able to
  – Work productively
  – Form lifelong relationships
  – Realise one’s potential
  – Participate meaningfully in the life of the community
  – Cope with the normal stresses of life
  – Face and overcome adversity
Mental disorders

• Abnormality in mental functions in terms of emotions, behaviour, thoughts, perception, cognition...

• Causing distress to the sufferer or those around him/her

• Leading to impairment in functioning in the family, at work and in the community...
Some signs and symptoms of mental disorders

• Delusion, hallucination, abnormal behaviour, abnormal speech
• Low mood, loss of energy, hopelessness, weepy spells, guilt feeling, suicidal thoughts and attempt
• Memory loss, wandering
• Conduct problems: stealing, lying
• Epileptic fits and so on...
Causes of Mental Disorders

- Biological Factors
- Psychological Factors
- Social Factor

Venn Diagram showing the overlap of biological, psychological, and social factors.
African traditional religion cosmology

• Supreme deity
  – Source of “life force”/ “mystical power” that permeates entire universe
• Other lesser deities and gods
• Spirits
• Ancestors
• Special humans: medicine men, herbalists, witches, diviners etc
• Man
• Animals
• Inanimate objects
• Phenomena
“Witchcraft” Beliefs in the context of African religious worldview

- Witches belong to a special category of humans that have the ability and knowledge to access, manipulate and use “mystical power” for either good or evil (often evil) in the community
  - Others include wizards, priests and medicine
- Can afflict others with illness (including mental illness and epilepsy)
Intersection of mental disorders and “witchcraft” beliefs

• Causal attribution of mental disorders
  – African traditional religious beliefs/syncretism with the Abrahamic religions

• Manifestation of mental illness
  – Symptoms often very strange/ mysterious

• Treatment seeking behaviour
  – Often follow perceived causal attribution
  – Often complex, featuring traditional healers
Mental disorders of importance to “witchcraft” beliefs

• Old age conditions
  – Dementia, geriatric depression

• General adult conditions
  – Psychosis, depression and suicide, anxiety, epilepsy, substance use disorders

• Child and adolescent
  – Children in exceptionally difficult situations
  – The “house help” phenomenon
  – autism, ADHD, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, intellectual disability, bedwetting
Public mental health effects of "witchcraft" beliefs

In the community...

- Erroneous beliefs about causation (witchcraft, spirit possession)
- Negative attitude towards the mentally ill
- Stigma
- Discrimination
- Human right abuses
- Poor treatment choices
- Huge burden of mental disorders

Gureje et al, 2005
In treatment settings...

• 80% of persons with serious mental disorders in Nigeria do not receive any treatment in the previous 12 month...

• Across developing countries, range: 76.3% to 85.4 %
• The few who do receive treatment do so from traditional and faith healers...
• Treatment often based on erroneous beliefs (e.g. “witchcraft” beliefs) shared by healers, patients and their relatives...
• Treatment practices therefore often harmful and inhumane....
Human rights violation in treatment settings...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nigeria</th>
<th>Kenya</th>
<th>Ghana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shackled/restrained</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaten</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>59.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*N= 85 persons after receiving treatment for psychosis from Trad & faith healers
*Yet to be published data
Way forward...

• Awareness and advocacy
• Legislation to protect persons with mental disorders
• Other health system-wide and mental health system-wide reforms
  – Human resources, health financing, governance etc.