

NAMI Education Meeting

Panel Discussion: "Mental Illness Across Cultures"

Panelist Dr. Linda Song representing the Asian Community

Panelist Dr. Juan Ramos representing the Latino community

Moderator is NAMI Executive Director Esther Kaleko-Kravitz

May 8, 2008

Dr. Linda Song was trained as a medical Doctor in China. She received a Ph.D in Psychology from Arizona University. Dr. Song has been a psychologist in our area for five years.. Her patients range in age from 6 years and above. One patient is 103 years old. Dr. Song specializes in the field of emotion/stress management. She also writes articles on mental health for the Chinese communities.

Dr. Ramos retired 4 years ago from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) where he worked for 35 years. He has a Ph.D on Policy Research and Management. Dr. Ramos said that when he first began working at NIMH researchers were doing work on establishing mental health centers. This would involve inpatient care, outpatient care, day care, emergency services and consultation and education. NIMH also studied aging and minority issues. They had research training services in those areas until 1981.

According to Dr. Ramos NIMH has changed its focus to that of doing research in the neurosciences and different medications. There is no research in delivery of mental health services.

Both Dr. Ramos and Dr. Song stated that in their communities language is a barrier for obtaining mental health services. Dr. Song said that people suffering from mental illness in the Asian community might find it hard to find the appropriate Chinese word that matches the one in English. They don't have the language to talk about their problem. Dr. Ramos added to that by saying that in the Latino community there is frequently no one to translate into Spanish for the client. Mental Health services for members of the Latino community need to be in the language of the client. Professional schools many times don't respond to the needs of the labor market. Dr. Ramos emphasized it is important to recruit mental health professionals who speak Spanish.

Dr. Ramos pointed out that 1 out of 4 children are Hispanic. In the Catholic Church 40% are Hispanic. It is predicted that by the year 2050, 86% of the Catholic Church will be Latino..

Dr. Song and Dr. Ramos spoke about the stigma of having mental illness in the Asian and Hispanic cultures. According to Dr. Song, if there is a Chinese family member with a mental illness, family members won't talk about it. In the Hispanic community you stay away from the afflicted person. Dr. Song and Dr. Ramos agreed that mental illness is the AIDS or cancer of 20 years ago.

Dr. Song noted that in the Chinese community there is the feeling that problems should be solved within the family. The Great Grandma is the most powerful one in the family. Everyone in the family is involved in the person's issues.

Dr. Ramos added to the idea of stigma by stating that in the Latino culture many generations may live in the same house. The Father is in charge of the household. His authority comes from G-d. Both the husband and wife are accountable to G-d. The Latino community has a strong religious base. Mental Health services for the Latino community should be faith based.

Dr. Ramos also said that when mental health professionals treat clients with mental illness, they also need to involve the family. That is because family is very important in the Hispanic communities. The family must be addressed as a unit.

For the Latin American immigrant there is a conflict as to whether to be Latino, Hispanic, or Gringo(American).

Dr. Song and Dr. Ramos noted that the mental illness they see the most in their communities is depression. A higher rate of depression can lead to suicide. Seniors in the Chinese community have the highest rate of suicide. Dr. Ramos said that the Hispanics have a larger r rate of suicide than the general population. There are higher level of stressors for Latino women.

Dr. Song talked about emotion and stress in the Chinese immigrant community. An immigrant to this country frequently starts with nothing. They are under a lot of emotional and financial stress. There are high expectations when immigrants come to the U.S. Many times the reality of living in the U.S. is not as good as the client hoped it would be. This can cause depression.

Dr. Song Asian said that clients may go to one or two sessions with a psychologist and then stop going for treatment. Clients don't have knowledge about mental illness and the importance of continuity of care.

Medication dosage for a client who is Asian might be different than for someone who is Caucasian because of body type.

Dr. Song and Dr. Ramos spoke about the services clients in their communities need for better mental health treatment. Dr. Song stressed the importance of educating leaders in the Chinese community about mental health because people come to them for problems. Primary Care Doctors should also be trained in dealing with mental illness issues because they are the front line access to health care.

Dr. Song also stressed the necessity of having a parenting class. Prevention of mental illness is important. The key to prevention is to start with young children which depends on the skill and knowledge of the parents. An Asian parent focuses on the academic needs of the child and sometimes feel that growing up is someone else's job. In a parenting class it is necessary to emphasize spending quality time with children during the early years of 1-7 years.

Dr. Ramos also said that prevention is also key in treating mental illness. Dr. Ramos noted that a school teacher in second grade can identify the shy, withdrawn child in the back of the room who needs attention. She/He can refer that child to a counselor.

Dr. Ramos also felt that the NAMI Family to Family class taught in Spanish was beneficial. In that class everyone participates as a group.

Dr. Ramos pointed out the "American Journal of Psychiatry"- the Spanish language edition. Psychiatrists are addressing the language barrier by publishing professional journals in Spanish.

Dr. Ramos said we need to realize that the control a person has in the family and work place is necessary for their self esteem. Social participation in the community is essential too. The client must be involved in the community. No one should suffer in silence.

Notes taken by Rochelle Banta

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