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# **ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF THE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM:**

**KEY MESSAGES TO HEALTH PLANNERS  
AND POLICY-MAKERS**



**World Health  
Organization**

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**Mental Health: Evidence and Research  
Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse  
World Health Organization  
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## **Economic aspects of the mental health system: key messages to health planners and policy-makers**

### **Introduction**

The widening recognition of mental health as a significant international public health issue has led to increasing demands for evidence that investing into mental health is worthwhile. Specifically, there is a need for evidence showing that mental health care strategies can be cost-effective. There is also increasing interest in the way in which mental health systems are organized and financed and their effectiveness assessed.

WHO has recently developed the WHO Assessment Instrument for Mental health Systems (WHO-AIMS) to systematically assess key organizations and resources focused on improving mental health within a country or province. Such assessments provide context to economic evaluation.

This document is aimed at health planners and policy-makers at national or sub-national level who have a responsibility for strengthening, monitoring and evaluating mental health systems. The aims of the document are:

- To highlight the need for and relevance of an economic perspective in planning, providing and evaluating mental health services.
- To assist mental health planners and evaluators in understanding and using economic arguments for (a) increasing the allocation of resources for mental health and (b) improving cost-effective utilization of resources to strengthen mental health systems.

### **Economics and mental health**

Mental or psychological well-being is part of an individual's capacity to lead a fulfilling life. That includes the ability to study, work or pursue leisure interests, and to make day-to-day personal or household decisions about educational, employment, housing or other choices. Disturbances to an individual's mental well-being compromise these capacities, sometimes in a fundamental and enduring manner.

The potential consequences of mental disorder are numerous, including disturbed mood, thought or behaviour among affected individuals (or their caregivers), and lost earnings or savings as a result of impaired work ability or health care expenditures by households. Mental disorder among individuals or households creates a pressure on society to provide a range of health and welfare services.

Economics is concerned with the use and distribution of resources among the individuals making up a society, and how different ways of allocating resources impacts on their well-being. A common misconception is that economics is just about saving money. In fact, economics is about the optimal allocation of available or potentially available resources. The

field of economics is relevant to the health sector because resources available to meet all possible health needs or demands are finite (whether a country is economically rich or poor). In all societies, choices have to be made regarding how best to allocate limited resources.

## Types of economic evidence for mental health action

Decisions on how to allocate resources in mental health are complicated by the fact that mental disorders are common, disabling and often long-lasting. Recent epidemiological research has demonstrated the considerable epidemiological burden that mental disorders impose on the world as a whole (more than 10% of lost years of healthy life and over 30% of all years lived with disability; WHO, 2001). The enormity of this disease burden is caused by the relatively high prevalence of mental disorders, the often chronic or recurring nature of these disorders and the severity of disability associated with many mental disorders. Low rates of case recognition and lack of access to effective treatment compound the problem, particularly in poor countries.

Economic analysis provides a set of principles and analytical techniques to assess the relative costs and consequences of different health strategies. In relation to mental health, it seeks to address key policy questions about the magnitude of mental health problems, the relative impact and cost of different intervention strategies and the appropriate use of scarce resources.

### Mental health policy questions concerning intervention (cost-)effectiveness

Policy question	Research task	Evidence generated
1. How significant is the burden of mental disorders?	Estimate burden of disease Identify other social & economic consequences of disorders	% of total disease burden due to mental disorder % of mental disorder burden caused by different conditions (e.g., depression, alcohol)
2. How effective are interventions for burden-some conditions?	Estimate current effective coverage Assess impact of new interventions	Comparative efficacy of interventions % of burden averted with current interventions or avertable with better strategies
3. What will it cost to provide effective care?	Calculate full cost of interventions Estimate cost of scaling-up coverage	Comparative cost of interventions at different levels of coverage in the population
4. What are the most cost-effective strategies?	Integration of costs and effectiveness Specification of essential packages	Evidence-based priorities for the cost-effective allocation of mental health care resources

Information on the **burden of mental disorders**, whether expressed in monetary terms or epidemiological terms (e.g, via a summary measure of population health such as disability-adjusted life years [DALYs]), gives information on the magnitude of mental, neurological and substance abuse disorders at the population level. Economic burden studies (also known as cost-of-illness studies) have the advantage of showing the impact of mental ill-health on the health care system and also on levels of work productivity. Yet, burden estimates are an insufficient basis for allocating resources and setting priorities because they do not compare the potential cost or impact of different actions.

**Economic evaluation** (incorporating **cost-effectiveness analysis**) of existing service arrangements and current or new intervention strategies is an integral part of mental health system evaluation, providing suggestions for renewed action and more cost-effective investment. However, even though cost-effectiveness analysis is a necessary mechanism for identifying an efficient allocation of mental health resources (greatest health gain for available resources), such analysis is insufficient for setting overall priorities in the mental health system.

For the broader process of **priority-setting** in mental health, the cost-effectiveness (efficiency) of particular interventions or their combination into service packages needs to be systematically weighed up against (a) other objectives or goals of the mental health system - in particular (i) fairness (with respect to equity in geographical or financial access to services), (ii) poverty reduction and (iii) human rights protection - plus (b) the feasibility, acceptability and sustainability of different types of intervention.

## **Intervention impact and cost-effectiveness**

Mental health interventions encompass a wide range of possible actions, including legislative and regulatory frameworks, prevention and promotion, treatment and rehabilitation. There is currently more cost-effectiveness data for treatment than for other mental health actions. An analysis of the comparative effectiveness and costs of pharmacological and psychosocial interventions for reducing the burden of mental disorders, both at the level of different world regions and at the national level, has been recently completed. Details of this analysis may be found in *Dollars, DALYs and Decisions: Economic Aspects of the Mental Health System* (WHO, 2006). The key findings of this analysis are as follows:

### **Pharmacological interventions**

- For psychosis, the high price of buying newer (so-called 'atypical') antipsychotic drugs makes their use in lower-income regions of the world inadvisable on cost-effectiveness or affordability grounds (although this situation should change as these drugs come off patent); conventional neuroleptic drugs have similar efficacy and are much less expensive.

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