

## SPECIALIST FOCUS



# GP School Network: Learning Health for Healthy Learning

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## Introduction

With Singapore's growing population and social changes such as families with working parents and increasing divorce rates, it is expected that mental health issues will grow in importance. This was predicted by the World Health Organisation. The Ministry of Health, in anticipation of this, appointed the National Mental Health Committee to develop the National Mental Health policy and work out a blueprint of initiatives to meet the challenges ahead.

## Existing Framework

Children and adolescents who develop mental health problems are seen by several different frontline services such as schools, general practitioners, polyclinics and Family Service Centres. Due to lack of expertise and experience, most are usually referred directly to the Child Guidance Clinic (CGC) of Institute of Mental Health. This has resulted in long waiting time for appointments to see the child psychiatric team. Sometimes, this has also resulted in creating barriers for access in cases which need highly specialised help as the clinics are full of cases that are sometimes better handled in the community rather than being referred to a tertiary care facility like CGC.

## Breaking the Barriers

The main thrust behind the mental health blueprint for children and adolescents is in three objectives of the **Response, Early intervention and Assessment in Community Mental Health (REACH)** for students programme. These are namely to improve mental health of children and adolescents in schools, provide early interventions, support and training to school counsellors and, to develop a mental health network for children and adolescents in the community. To achieve these objectives, a team of multidisciplinary professionals with a variety of skills and experiences were rounded up to drive the activities of the team.

## Piloting a Prototype

REACH for students is being piloted in a school cluster of 13 schools and will be expanded to a larger setting if found useful. At the same time, a small group of family doctors were recruited as part of a GP-School network for special training in child mental health, starting with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD) and gradually expanding to other problems. In 2007, MOH Health Manpower Development Plan (HMDP) Visiting Expert, Professor Rosemary Tannock from University of Toronto and the Hospital for Sick Children came to do a week-long course on ADHD and in January 2008, Professor Philip Kendall from Temple University in Philadelphia gave a two-week training and workshop on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.

## The New Horizon

We have a total of 10 GPs on the IMH GP-School Network and will be working closely with them to establish a pool of family doctors capable of handling mental health disorders in children and adolescents and also start a collaborative working relationship between doctors and schools. In the future, this network will also consist of social services in the vicinity and together form the basis of a good primary mental healthcare set up.