DETOXIFYING THE WORKPLACE

# Mental health inclusivity

**This year's World Mental Health Day highlights the vital connection between mental health, work**

DATUK DR MUHAMMED RADZI ABU HASSAN AND DR RABINDRA ABEYASINGHE
**KUALA LUMPUR**
news@nst.com.my

IN today's fast-paced world, where nearly 60 per cent of the global population spend a significant portion of their lives at work, the mental health of employees has become a critical issue.

This year's World Mental Health Day highlighted the vital connection between mental health and work. The workplace environment can either exacerbate or alleviate mental health conditions, making it both a risk and a protective factor.

High stress levels, job insecurity and poor work-life balance are common risk factors that negatively impact employees' mental health.

Conversely, supportive management, a positive work environment and access to mental health resources can promote mental health and wellbeing.

## CHANGING EMPLOYMENT LANDSCAPE IN MALAYSIA

Recent findings from the National Health and Morbidity Survey revealed the prevalence of depression in Malaysia has doubled between 2019 and 2023.

The highest rates of depression are found among people aged 16 to 19, followed by those aged 20 to 29 and 30 to 39.

These age groups are integral parts of the future and current workforce, and their mental health issues must be addressed to prevent more severe conditions.

Economic challenges and higher living costs may lead some to take on extra work online, further increasing the stressors on one's mental health.

A report by the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation showed significant growth in the local gig economy, with more than 100,000 new participants between 2022 and 2023.

This brings new stressors such as the experience of social isolation if working alone or remotely, uncertainty and instability of income and anxiety for the future due to market competitiveness, perceptions about artificial intelligence and the lack of social protection.

The impact of mental health issues in the workplace is profound. Economically, poor mental health leads to decreased productivity, increased absenteeism and higher turnover rates.

Globally, it is estimated that 12 billion working days are lost each year due to mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, costing the global economy US$1 trillion in lost productivity.

Poor mental health in the workplace can also impact the working environment and interpersonal relationships, leading to increased tension and conflict, workplace harassment, bullying, discrimination and exclusion.

Outside of the workplace, the impacts of poor working environments can extend to families and communities affecting interpersonal relationships and lifestyle choices.

In healthcare settings, the challenges are particularly acute.

Healthcare professionals often work in high-pressure environments with long hours, high patient loads and the emotional toll of dealing with illness and death.

These factors can contribute to burnout, anxiety and depression. Additionally, toxic work environments characterised by lack of support, inadequate staffing and poor management can exacerbate these issues.

Healthcare workers may also face bullying and harassment from colleagues or superiors.

The lack of a respectful workspace can significantly affect employees' mental health across various sectors. A respectful workspace is one where employees feel valued, heard, and supported.

When this is lacking, employees may experience feelings of isolation, low morale, and decreased motivation. This can be particularly detrimental in high-stress professions, where the absence of respect and support can lead to severe mental health issues.

## NEED FOR SUPPORTIVE AND INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES

As such, it is essential to invest in mental health support and foster inclusive workplaces that accommodate the needs of all employees, including those with mental health conditions.

Creating such environments can yield substantial economic bene-

> **Creating such environments can yield substantial economic benefits, as well as improve familial and community well-being.**

fits, as well as improve familial and community well-being.

However, many people with mental health conditions face barriers in securing and maintaining employment due to stigma and discrimination, which not only threatens their economic stability but can also exacerbate their mental health issues.

A safe and healthy work environment is a right for all, and addressing these barriers can help mitigate the risk factors associated with unemployment and poor mental health, benefiting the entire community.

Workplaces can become more supportive by implementing interventions that prevent mental health conditions, promote positive mental health, and support employees with mental health issues.

These interventions can include improving working conditions, creating an enabling and respectful workplace, providing manager training in mental health, and offering supported employment initiatives and return-to-work programmes.

The Health Ministry has recently taken an important step by collaborating with the Human Resources Ministry through a memorandum of understanding between the National Centre of Excellence for Mental Health and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health for mental health at the workplace.

There is also an existing programme called the KOSPEN-WOW to increase awareness of mental health issues at work.

There is, however, a need to further enhance the current scope of services to include quality promotive and preventative services in the community for support.

## ROLE OF COMMUNITY NETWORKS AND DEINSTITUTIONALISATION

Deinstitutionalisation refers to the process of shifting mental health care from large, centralised institutions to community-based settings.

It emphasises the importance of integrating individuals with mental health conditions into society, allowing them to live more independently and with dignity.

Creating mental health-inclusive and supportive workplaces can enhance support within the community.

These networks play a vital role and are a step towards destigmatising mental health conditions and deinstitutionalisation.

They can provide essential services such as peer support groups, mental health education, and local resources that help individuals manage their conditions.

These networks can work in tandem with workplace initiatives to create a comprehensive support system.

By fostering mental health-inclusive workplaces, we can support this transition by ensuring that individuals have access to services that protect their mental health and that people with such conditions have access to similar services and employment opportunities, preventing further marginalisation.

Addressing mental health at work is not just a moral imperative but also an economic one, as it can lead to increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, a more harmonious work environment and ultimately happy families and communities.

As we observe World Mental Health Day, let us commit to transforming our workplaces into environments that prioritise mental health and well-being.

Employers, policymakers and community leaders must work together to create supportive, inclusive and respectful workspaces.

By investing in mental health resources, promoting inclusive workplaces and supporting mental health in both the workplace and communities, we can foster a healthier, more productive society.

It's time for employers to recognise the importance of mental health and take proactive steps to support their employees' well-being both professionally and personally.

*Dr Muhammed Radzi is the Health director-general and Dr Rabindra is the World Health Organisation representative for Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore*