

A challenging times to look after mental wellbeing.

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Dr Adrian James
President
Royal College of Psychiatrists



Dr Adrian James is President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPsych), London, U.K. He is a Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist and has extensive experience of working in NHS for over 36 years. Dr James continues to work part-time in the front-line in Forensic Psychiatry services with Devon Partnership NHS Trust.

Dr James was previously Medical Director of Devon Partnership NHS Trust and chair of South West Division of RCPsych. Dr James has held various national roles for mental health in U.K. He was previously Parliamentary Liaison Committee representative for RCPsych and campaigned for additional resources for mental health. He was involved in developing counter terrorism strategy as an advisor to the then U.K. Government and was Registrar of RCPsych between 2015-2020.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists is a global leader in mental health with over 19,000 members in U.K. and International divisions. Dr James started his Presidential term with RCPsych in July 2020 in the middle of covid-19 pandemic. He has been extremely busy with various College activities but found time to speak with Swasthya in early December 2021. It was my honour to speak with Dr James and I began the interview by asking him...

Dr Santosh Mudholkar Interviewed
Dr Adrian James for Swasthya.

Q1. What are unique global mental health challenges during covid pandemic and how is RCPsych responding to it?

Mental health is a crucial global health issue which affects everyone irrespective of their country of origin. Untreated Depression alone is the leading cause of lack of productivity at workplace and suicide. Although we have made huge strides in increasing mental health awareness it is still not considered as a priority in several countries. U.K. has a good state funded mental health service often an envy of rest of the world. However, even in U.K. we have lobbied successive Governments for improving funding.

Generally, as health budget has its purstrings there is a tendency for funding and resources to be diverted to medical and surgical services in acute care rather than mental health services. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has campaigned to address this imbalance and ensure parity between physical and mental health. I would like resources are prioritised for those with severe and enduring mental illness and early detection and treatment of addictions.

I also consider another global mental health issue which needs to be addressed is that of treating those with mental ill health with dignity and respect. In several countries across the globe mentally ill patients are detained in hospital without proper legal framework. Also, those who have a history of mental illness and have made recovery are often discriminated at work or are reluctant to disclose mental health issues to their employers due to fear of being dismissed from work.

SARS-Cov2 virus is a neurotoxin and post-mortem findings have shown that it affects brain. In U.K. we have seen increase in referrals to mental health services during the pandemic. Non health issues such as prolonged lockdowns, social isolation, loss of livelihood and poverty have contributed to onset of new episodes of Depression. Those who have suffered from covid-19 and although made physical health recovery, had psychological impact with escalation of anxiety disorders and PTSD. Those with pre-existing mental health problems have had to deal with disruption in face to face consultation. It has required them to adapt to virtual assessments and new ways of mental health delivery. Some patients are also experiencing long term physical and mental health symptoms i.e. long covid.

Covid-19 is a public health emergency. The College has led from front and over the last two years I am having regular meetings with Chief Medical Officer, Directors of Public Health, NHS England and Medical Directors for various mental health trusts in England and devolved nations. In 2020 we collated evidence to identify which population characteristics place individuals at a high risk of covid-19. Once vaccination was available for general population in December 2020, we ensured that those with mental health problems are not excluded. The College was swift to move operations on-line and we were able to transfer all education and training activities online by the second half of 2020. RCPsych was one of the first Royal Colleges to hold membership examinations (including CASC) on-line. Also, first time in the history of the College we held RCPsych International Congress 2021 on-line.

Q2. Historically, barriers to accessing mental health services have been stigma and lack of mental health awareness. How has public perception about mental health changed over the last 50 years?

Mental health awareness has increased over the last 50 years and there is optimism due to a range of treatment options available including psychotropic medication and talking therapies. Public health campaigns to reduce stigma by voluntary agencies such as MIND and Rethink have been supported by College. Public attitudes do change though at a slower pace. I have been open about speaking about my lived experience of mental health. Just like physical health people need to be open and not wary if someone with mental health problems moves in next door. The College has also raised awareness about mental health issues in sports.

Q3. As President of RCPsych you led the College has taken a bold stance in dealing with racism and addressing health inequalities and celebrating Equity and Diversity. Can you inform our readers about key College initiatives?

It is important to recognise that racism is a cause of mental illness. Ethnic minority staff are struggling to pass through various hoops and experience barriers to their career progression. Doctors from Black, Asian and minority ethnic background are more likely to be referred to GMC and have sanctioned placed against them compared to white colleagues. RCPsych has published



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a position statement against racism. Since I took over as President, I have appointed Presidential leads for Race Equality and led on Equality Action plan. I would like to support staff from diverse backgrounds to make workplace more welcoming and healthier. However, I recognise that this is only a start and there is lot more work to be done. I am willing to listen to any new ideas and suggestions from Swasthya readers.

Q4. How should clinicians working in these unprecedented times look after their own mental wellbeing?

We are living in unprecedented times in covid-19 pandemic with periods of lockdown, resulting in lack of face to face contact, social isolation and uncertainty about fresh wave of covid-19 variant Omicron. In such challenging times it is important to look after ones own mental wellbeing. We all need to find time and space to talk about our thoughts and feelings with close family and friends, maintain social connections and structure our day. It is crucial to look after your physical health and continue to remain physically and mentally active. I would also give a word of caution to limit harmful use of alcohol and illicit drugs.