



Strengthening Adolescent Mental Health and Substance Use Prevention: Mtendere Rehabilitation Center Engages the District Health Management Team

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Adolescent substance use and addiction remain a growing concern in Malawi, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas where young people face increasing social, economic, and psychological pressures. In response to this challenge, Mtendere Rehabilitation Center (MRC) continues to strengthen its prevention and treatment efforts through collaboration with key stakeholders.

Recently, Mtendere Rehabilitation Center held a strategic engagement meeting with the District Health Management Team (DHMT 4th of Feb) in Mzuzu to introduce its work, share its service model, and explore opportunities for collaboration in adolescent mental health and substance use prevention.

A Preventive and Holistic Approach

During the meeting, Mtendere presented its preventive session framework, which is implemented in schools, youth clubs, families, and community settings. The sessions are

designed to be participatory and youth-friendly, allowing adolescents to openly discuss mental health, substance use, and the factors that influence their behaviour.

The preventive model guides adolescents through understanding commonly used substances such as alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, pharmaceuticals, inhalants, and locally available drugs. Participants learn the difference between experimental use, recreational use, problematic use, and dependence, helping them recognize early warning signs before substance use escalates into addiction.

Importantly, Mtendere's approach emphasizes that addiction does not occur in isolation. The sessions highlight the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual factors that contribute to substance use, including trauma, peer pressure, bullying, academic challenges, family environment, and loss of purpose. Interactive activities and games are used to demonstrate how social influence and decision-making affect behaviour.

Understanding the Consequences of Addiction

The discussions also focus on the wide-ranging consequences of addiction. Adolescents are guided to reflect

on the psychological effects such as anxiety, depression, and increased risk of suicide; physical effects including weakened immunity, overdose, and poor health; social consequences such as school dropout, broken relationships, and stigma; and spiritual consequences, including loss of purpose and inner peace.

By addressing these dimensions together, Mtendere promotes a comprehensive understanding of addiction and encourages healthier coping strategies and help-seeking behaviour.

Comprehensive Rehabilitation Services

In addition to prevention, Mtendere Rehabilitation Center shared details of its treatment and support services. The Center operates an inpatient rehabilitation program for male adolescents with an eight-bed capacity, offering a structured three-month therapeutic program delivered by a multidisciplinary team. The program includes school or work reintegration and aftercare support to promote sustained recovery.

Mtendere also provides an outpatient program open to both male and female adolescents with various forms of addiction, alongside ongoing aftercare services, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous meetings, and community outreach initiatives.

Feedback and Collaboration with the DHMT

The DHMT welcomed Mtendere's initiative, recognizing the increasing prevalence of adolescent substance use in several hotspots within Mzuzu. The team provided constructive guidance, emphasizing the importance of formalizing referral pathways with health facilities such as Mzuzu Central Hospital and Mapale Community Clinic, strengthening data collection systems for monitoring and funding purposes, and developing a clear annual implementation plan and budget.

The DHMT further committed to exploring support for drug testing kits and consulting with Zomba Mental Hospital for possible technical collaboration.

Looking Ahead

The engagement marked an important step toward strengthening collaboration between Mtendere Rehabilitation Center and district health authorities. By combining prevention, early identification, treatment, and aftercare with strong referral systems, Mtendere aims to contribute to improved mental wellbeing and reduced substance use among adolescents.

Mtendere Rehabilitation Center remains committed to working with schools, families, communities, and government partners to provide hope, resilience, and new beginnings for young people in Malawi.

