

# REFLECTIONS FROM UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL (UKZN) REGISTRARS ON THE 5<sup>TH</sup> AFRICAN DIASPORA GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH CONFERENCE

*Bonginkosi Mafuze, Siziphiwe Myeni*

## DR. BONGINKOSI MAFUZE:

**H**osted by the Africa Global Mental Health Institute (AGMHI), the 5<sup>th</sup> African Diaspora Global Mental Health Conference took place on 13-14 September 2022 in Cape Town, South Africa. The AGMHI's conference was an event I was really grateful to be part of especially after enduring the difficult times during the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited such gatherings to being held on online platforms. This conference brought together notable mental health practitioners and care providers from all corners of the world to come together to address the ongoing mental health challenges facing Africa and the diaspora.

IT WAS VERY ENCOURAGING AND INSPIRATIONAL TO SEE YOUNG PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN THIS CONFERENCE UNDER ITS THEME "EMERGING VOICES IN MENTAL HEALTH." I MET YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN FINDING SOLUTIONS IN CLOSE COLLABORATION WITH MORE EXPERIENCED SCIENTISTS IN THE FIELD OF MENTAL HEALTH.

The conference provided us an opportunity to learn more about evidence-based practices and how clinical trials are conducted from an African perspective with a global mindset. This experience made me feel very optimistic about the future of mental health care that is geared toward addressing the needs of an African community. I got the chance to network with like-minded people and gain valuable information to use in my early career path to being an impactful mental



*Prof. Jimmy Volmink*

health practitioner in the community. There were four working groups in the domains of research, training and education, clinical care delivery, and advocacy and policy which delivered key concepts that will help achieve the aims and objectives of improving mental health care in Africa and the diaspora. The theme of the conference emerged in most of the presentations and in talks from the young to the experienced through relevant take-home messages such as, "lift as we rise," "it is not a lack of talent, but a lack of opportunity" and "victim narrative, or victorious narrative."

As a young African mental health practitioner, such events can only inspire one to do better. The experience made me think of what kind of mental



*Drs. Rick Wolthusen and Khanyo Ntokoza Ngcobo*

health service I would love to work in the near future that is inspired by global efforts but locally relevant.

We were provided with great insights into the history of South Africa and the continent in its journey to independence and transformation in the academic leadership field, the training of mental health practitioners, and legal systems as a platform of mental health advocacy, in what is called “therapeutic jurisprudence.” Further engagements through breakaway sessions and feedback were the backbone of the importance of engagement in the development of tools to address the needs of the African population.

**THIS EXPERIENCE WAS POSITIVE BECAUSE IT HELPED ME TO UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF A MENTAL HEALTH PRACTITIONER AS A MEMBER OF THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM IN A VERY DIVERSE ENVIRONMENT AS A COMMUNITY LEADER, ACADEMIC, CLINICIAN, OR POLITICAL FIGURE.**

It was an incredible event and I learned a great deal! I observed one of the duties of an emerging voice in mental health is centred around supporting and directing care delivery in the most locally relevant manner. After this exciting in-person experience, I look forward to the 6<sup>th</sup> annual conference perhaps in another country or city. Our wonderful keynote speakers, Prof. Jimmy Volmink and Prof. Laila Asmal, gave us insights into their lives, experiences, and pathways to becoming great researchers and leaders. I found that this was very effective for us as young psychiatrists as it goes to show the completely varied routes that succeed a medical degree.

A massive thank you to the Co-Directors, Dr. Dave Henderson and Prof Bonga Chiliza, and the AGMHI team for organizing this conference for us. I am really looking forward to the next conference.

## DR. SIZIPHIWE MYENI:

In 2021, I was fortunate to be a part of the virtual 4<sup>th</sup> African Diaspora Global Mental Health Conference. That was my first ever experience of such a conference. Looking back, I don’t think that I fully appreciated the depth and the importance of this conference, maybe because it was virtual. It was not until I was part of this year’s in-person AGMHI conference in Cape Town that I fully understood the amazing work of this organisation.

Going into the first day of the conference, I did not know what to expect yet I was both excited and nervous. My nervousness quickly changed to a sense of being inspired after listening to Prof. Jimmy Volmink’s keynote address. I remember almost being too scared to ask such a powerful man a question, but fortunately I somehow found myself sitting with him during our lunch break; I remember asking him if he thought he had lived his purpose. Prof. Volmink left all of us feeling both inspired and challenged. His words will not be forgotten.

The day was clearly off to a great start and it continued to get more and more interesting and informative with each of the speakers giving presentations on the different AGMHI domains. My personal interest is in advocacy and policy so I found Dr. Mvuyiso Talatala’s talk particularly interesting because he spoke about something that for us South Africans, and more specifically for South African mental health care workers, will go down in history as “the greatest cause of human rights violation” in our country. During the breakaway sessions I decided to join the advocacy and policy workgroup. Wow! Advocacy and policy is about so much more than shouting from roof tops or trending #hashtags on social media. Drs. Rick Wolthusen and Khanyo Ntokoza Ngcobo taught us that a lot more thought, planning, and skill goes into advocacy and policy making in order for it to be a success and to reach far and wide to the right people. This was an eye opener.

The first day ended on a beautiful note with an amazing dinner at Durbanville Hills which I thoroughly



*Prof. Laila Asmal*

enjoyed; it also gave me a chance to connect with people in a more relaxed environment. It is almost natural to migrate towards who you know so when in a more relaxed environment, it becomes easier to mix and mingle.

AT THE END OF DAY ONE, I WAS FEELING LESS NERVOUS THAN I HAD GOING IN AND THERE WAS A FIRE THAT WAS STARTING TO LIGHT UP INSIDE OF ME THAT I CAN ONLY EXPLAIN BY SAYING THAT IT CAME FROM WITNESSING AND REALISING THE BEAUTY OF BEING AFRICAN, OF BEING BLACK AND THAT THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A NEED TO APOLOGISE FOR IT OR HIDE IT.

The second day was even better than the first. I was seated next to Prof. Laila Asmal who gave me great advice about the journey of being a registrar and specifically about research, which I admitted to her was not my favourite thing. My favourite part of day two was listening to the amazing work that is being done across our continent by emerging researchers. I was blown away by the research that these young psychiatrists are doing in their countries and it really opened my mind to just how many interesting questions there are out there that need answers, and that research is in fact cool.

One of the most amazing things I witnessed at the conference was unity. It was how psychiatrists from all over Africa could come together, under one roof, from different backgrounds and have one goal in mind: to improve mental health among people of African descent in Africa and the world. This unity is seen through collaborations and sharing training

and education opportunities across the African continent.

Whilst I appreciate that the goal of the AGMHI is to address ongoing global mental health challenges and to accelerate the development of solutions for Africa and the diaspora, this conference was a huge place of personal growth for me as an individual. In a place that I least expected it, I found myself being confronted by my own demons and needing to confront these demons that challenge my own mental health. By doing so, I came out a better and stronger individual. My only criticism would be that two days is way too short, but even so, I would not miss the next one for anything in the world!

*All individuals and institutions committed to the advancement of mental health in Africa are welcome to join the AGMHI at [www.agmhi.org](http://www.agmhi.org)*



*Pictured (L to R): Drs. Lihle Mgweba-Bewana, Bonginkosi Mafuze, Claire Kwagala, Siziphiwe Myeni, Lindokuhle Thela*

