Rural Integrated Relief Service-Ghana

From the SelectedWorks of Emmanuel Dzadeyson

Summer August 4, 2012

ICT Project for Children with Autism in Ghana

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/autismghana/1/
Mental illness is the leading cause of disability in the world, according to the World Health Organization. Even more troubling: Four out of five people with psychiatric disorders live in developing countries, where they have few opportunities for treatment. That's certainly the case for autism in Africa, though, like in other resource-poor areas of the world, awareness is beginning to improve. In the past few years, a handful of researchers in various African countries have investigated children with autism. A new review of these reports finds that these children tend to be diagnosed much later than their counterparts in the U.S., and are more likely to be nonverbal. One survey asked Ghanaian nurses who specialize in psychiatry or pediatrics about the causes of autism. Some 40 percent fingered preternatural or supernatural causes, such as ancestral spirits, enemies, sinning or the action of the devil. These attitudes, the researchers suggest, mean that when a child has a mental or neurodevelopmental problem, help may first be sought from traditional healers or religious leaders, rather than from a medical clinic, which could account for the late diagnoses. These lost years may also contribute to the lack of language in many of the children with autism, perhaps because they did not have access to early interventions or speech therapy. The good news is that mental health issues in Africa are starting to get more attention.

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