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REVISITING GOA'S MENTAL HEALTH

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Despite Goa's privileged economic and environmental position, research has demonstrated that mental health is in fact a major public health issue in this Indian state.

Besides learning difficulties, child abuse, and high suicide rates, depression and anxiety seem to affect more than one third of the patients in primary care attenders. Medically unexplained physical symptoms are common clinical features, frequently misdiagnosed by the primary care physicians. Alcohol consumption has always been an integral part of Goan lifestyle, with alcohol dependence being a major public health issue. Drug abuse, in particular heroin and more recently LSD and ecstasy, are of concern in the coastal areas, and foreign influence might not be the only explanation for this fact.

Goa has one of the most extensive health systems in India. Private psychiatry is also relatively well represented, and fortunately there are some NGOs working in this field, providing care in areas where government services have been inadequate.

Despite those facts, the majority of persons with mental health disorders have never come in contact with mental health care providers. Persons prefer to consult non-mental health professionals, and frequently continue to seek help from Religious and Spiritual Leaders, Informal Counsellors, priests and Gurus with healing powers. Many of such practices are unregulated, expensive and potentially dangerous.

Priority mental health issues in Goa include sensitizing health workers to mental illnesses, and improving access to care in existing health services.