

Governments reluctant to invest in mental care

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THOUSANDS of South African children were impacted by intellectual and developmental disabilities because of conditions such as malnutrition, alcohol abuse, HIV/Aids and car accidents that could be prevented, experts said in Durban yesterday.

And once a child was mentally disabled, it was often difficult to obtain quality health services, and parents struggled to provide education for their children in special needs and ordinary public schools.

Professor Graham Thornycroft, of the Institute of Psychiatry at Kings College in London, who led a World Psychiatry Association task team to explore how mental health services could be uplifted worldwide, highlighted the World Health Organisation's Mental Health Gap Intervention Guide released recently. He was addressing health professional

and academic delegates at the Autism and Development Disabilities conference at the University of KwaZulu-Natal yesterday.

"Three quarters of the people in the world who need mental health care do not receive it and in high-income countries, two thirds of people who need mental health care do not receive it," Thornycroft said. "In Nigeria, 98 percent of people in need of mental health care do not receive it."

Governments were extremely reluctant to attach any importance to investment in mental health care, he said, adding that the WHO's advice to governments was to use the guide to improve the quality of health services and to close the treatment gap.

Dr Shuaib Kauchalli, of the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health at UKZN, said nutritional deficiencies played a key role in developmental disorders and 25 percent of children in South Africa were stunted. Chil-

dren comprised 43 percent of the country's population and two thirds of them lived in income poverty and depended on welfare grants. He said researchers had been surprised to discover that 40 percent of children had anaemia.

Professor Colleen Adnams, head of psychiatry and mental health at the University of Cape Town, said factors causing intellectual disability also included HIV/Aids, foetal alcohol syndrome, violence and injury in car accidents, meningitis, protein energy malnutrition, iodine deficiency, tuberculosis meningitis and meningitis.

Adnams said there was a "paucity" of reliable research data on the epidemiology of developmental disabilities in Africa. "Although 90 percent of children affected by developmental disabilities are likely to live in developing countries, 90 percent of the research is conducted in wealthier countries," she said.

