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SPOTLIGHT:

PAKISTAN PSYCHIATRIC SOCIETY AND THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF MENTAL HEALTH IN PAKISTAN

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Mental health has increasingly become a central issue of discussion across the globe, and Pakistan is no exception. With a population exceeding 240 million people, the country faces numerous challenges ranging from poverty, unemployment, and displacement to natural disasters, political instability, and the aftereffects of global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges not only affect physical health and economic progress but also deeply impact the psychological well-being of individuals and communities.

In this context, the Pakistan Psychiatric Society (PPS) has emerged as the premier professional body advocating for better mental health services, advancing psychiatric education, and providing a platform for knowledge-sharing among mental health professionals. Over the years, PPS has positioned itself as a beacon of progress in an area of healthcare that has long been under recognized.

This year's Annual Conference of PPS, originally planned for November in Quetta, and has drawn particular attention. Due to evolving security considerations, the Society has responsibly decided to relocate the event to Karachi. While this change is logistical in nature, it also highlights broader themes of adaptability, resilience, and the determination of mental health professionals to carry forward their mission, regardless of challenges.

The story of PPS, the importance of mental health, and the significance of this conference deserve careful exploration.

The Role of the Pakistan Psychiatric Society

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Founded with the vision of improving psychiatric practice and awareness in Pakistan, the Pakistan Psychiatric Society represents hundreds of psychiatrists and allied professionals across the country. Its objectives extend far beyond academic collaboration — PPS actively works to:

- Enhance education and training in psychiatry through workshops, symposia, and scientific meetings.
- 2. **Promote research** that reflects the unique social and cultural dynamics of Pakistan.
- 3. **Advocate for policy reform** so that mental health receives adequate resources in national health strategies.
- 4. **Fight stigma and misinformation**, encouraging communities to treat mental illness with compassion rather than shame.
- 5. **Collaborate internationally**, allowing Pakistani psychiatrists to remain connected with global best practices and scientific advancements.

The Society's annual conference is the flagship event that encapsulates these goals, creating a vibrant space where science, policy, and lived experience meet.

The Pakistan Psychiatric Society is preparing to host the 26th National Psychiatric Conference, which will take place from October 31 to November 2, 2025, at the Mövenpick Hotel in Karachi. For psychiatrists, psychologists, researchers, and mental health professionals across the country, this annual gathering is more than just a conference: it is a homecoming, an academic festival, and a reminder of the strength of our professional community. Originally, the conference was planned for Quetta, a city that has long been at the heart of Balochistan's cultural and intellectual life. It was a source of great pride for all of us working in Balochistan, including my colleagues at Mekran Medical College in Turbat, to see Quetta chosen as the venue. Unfortunately, circumstances beyond our control made it necessary to shift the conference to Karachi for security reasons. While the physical location has changed, the spirit of Balochistan and its representation remain central to the conference, and in many ways, the act of moving forward despite challenges captures the theme of this year's meeting: "Breaking Barriers, Building Resilience."

Themes of this nature are not chosen casually. They speak to the lived realities of our profession. Every psychiatrist in Pakistan is familiar with barriers, whether they take the form of stigma against mental illness, the shortage of trained professionals, or the inequities that leave smaller provinces struggling with limited services. We see these barriers when patients travel hundreds of kilometers to access care, when families hesitate to acknowledge psychiatric illness, or when young psychiatrists search for mentorship and recognition in a system that is still growing. Yet, as much as barriers define our context, resilience also does. Patients and families show resilience in facing illness; trainees demonstrate resilience in pursuing their learning despite limited resources; and as a profession, psychiatry in Pakistan continues to grow and adapt even under difficult circumstances. That is why this theme is so meaningful: it reflects both our struggles and our strengths.

Mental Health in Pakistan: An Urgent Challenge

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Pakistan, like many developing nations, faces a complex mental health crisis. Estimates suggest that more than 15–20% of the population experiences some form of mental disorder, ranging from depression and anxiety to severe conditions such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Yet the country has less than 1,000 qualified psychiatrists to serve millions in need.

Several key factors contribute to this crisis:

- **Stigma and cultural barriers:** Many communities associate mental illness with weakness, superstition, or personal failure, preventing individuals from seeking help.
- **Limited resources:** Only a fraction of the national health budget is allocated to mental health, leading to underfunded institutions and inadequate services.
- **Urban–rural divide:** While major cities may offer psychiatric services, vast rural areas have little or no access to specialized care.
- Lack of trained professionals: Beyond psychiatrists, there is a shortage of psychologists, psychiatric nurses, and social workers.
- **Impact of trauma:** Ongoing challenges such as terrorism, floods, displacement, and economic hardship contribute to widespread psychological distress.

The consequences of untreated mental illness are far-reaching — affecting education, workplace productivity, family relationships, and even national progress. Recognizing this, PPS has repeatedly stressed that mental health is not a luxury but a fundamental component of overall health.

Why Conferences Matter

Conferences organized by PPS are not mere academic gatherings. They are catalysts for change, creating spaces where:

- **New research is shared:** Pakistani psychiatrists can present findings that are specific to local contexts.
- **Best practices are exchanged:** International experts bring knowledge of cutting-edge treatments, while local professionals share culturally adapted approaches.
- Young professionals are mentored: Medical students and early-career psychiatrists gain exposure to new ideas and networks.
- **Policy dialogue is encouraged:** Policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders join discussions that influence healthcare strategies.
- **Stigma is challenged:** Public sessions and media coverage spread awareness beyond professional circles.

In short, the PPS Annual Conference strengthens the mental health ecosystem in Pakistan.

From Quetta to Karachi: The Venue Change

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The 2025 Annual Conference was initially scheduled to take place in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan. Hosting the event there carried symbolic weight: it would have highlighted the importance of bringing mental health conversations to regions often underserved and underrepresented.

However, given the security situation and the responsibility to ensure the safety of all participants, PPS made the prudent decision to shift the conference to Karachi. This move, while unfortunate for those who had hoped to gather in Quetta, underscores the Society's commitment to prioritizing well-being in every sense — both mental and physical.

Although the venue has shifted, Balochistan will not be absent from this meeting. Dedicated sessions will focus on the province's mental health landscape, examining both its challenges and its potential. The shortage of specialists, the difficulties of service delivery in underserved and conflict-affected areas, and the innovative ways communities have responded will be discussed with the seriousness they deserve. For me, as Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Mekran Medical College in Turbat, it is a source of pride to know that the voices of Balochistan will resonate strongly in Karachi. The presence of Balochistan at this national platform will not be symbolic alone; it will be academic, policy-oriented, and forward-looking.

Karachi, as Pakistan's largest city and economic hub, offers the infrastructure, accessibility, and security required for an event of this scale. The city has also historically hosted several successful PPS conferences, making it a reliable choice.

The importance of this conference goes beyond the exchange of academic knowledge. It is also a space for mentorship, networking, and collaboration. Senior psychiatrists will guide younger colleagues, residents will present their first pieces of research, and students will find inspiration for their future paths. At the same time, this gathering will serve as a bridge between clinical practice and policy, with opportunities for dialogue involving government representatives, NGOs, and other stakeholders who influence the direction of mental health care in Pakistan. In this way, the conference serves not only the profession but also the wider society.

The publications associated with the conference are an essential part of its legacy. The Abstract Book will preserve the scholarly contributions of participants, while the Souvenir will celebrate the reflections, messages, and memories that define the event's spirit. Beyond these, the Journal of Pakistan Psychiatric Society will carry highlights and editorials so that the lessons of the conference reach colleagues who cannot attend in person. These publications ensure that the conference endures as more than a moment in time; it becomes a reference point for our ongoing professional journey.

The Broader Meaning of Adaptability

The shift from Quetta to Karachi is not merely a change of venue; it reflects a larger lesson about adaptability in the field of mental health. Just as psychiatrists encourage patients to develop resilience in the face of life's challenges, PPS has demonstrated resilience as an institution. The ability to adapt plans while maintaining focus on long-term goals is a trait that strengthens both individuals and organizations.

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Moreover, the decision acknowledges that mental health work cannot be isolated from larger social realities. Security, economics, politics — all these factors shape the environment in which mental health professionals operate. PPS's flexibility shows that the Society remains grounded in practical realities while never losing sight of its mission.

Anticipated Themes of the 2025 Conference

Although the exact program is yet to be finalized, the conference in Karachi is expected to cover themes such as:

- Global perspectives on psychiatry and their relevance to Pakistan.
- Community mental health services: expanding access beyond urban centers.
- Child and adolescent psychiatry: addressing early interventions in schools.
- Addiction and substance use disorders, particularly among youth.
- Digital psychiatry and telehealth, especially in the post-COVID era.
- Policy frameworks for mental health, with recommendations for government.
- Workplace mental health, emphasizing productivity and employee well-being.

These discussions are crucial, not only for advancing professional knowledge but also for shaping the future of healthcare delivery in Pakistan.

Building a Culture of Compassion

Perhaps the most important work PPS does — and the conference amplifies — is building a culture of compassion. For too long, individuals with mental health conditions in Pakistan have been silenced, marginalized, or treated with shame. Conferences such as this one challenge that silence by putting mental health at the center of national dialogue.

Every lecture delivered, every panel discussion hosted, and every media headline generated contributes to breaking stigma. And as stigma breaks, more people may feel empowered to seek treatment, families may become more supportive, and communities may grow more inclusive.

Looking ahead

The decision to shift the PPS Annual Conference from Quetta to Karachi is a reminder of the challenges Pakistan faces, but also of the determination of its mental health community. Far from being a setback, the change represents a commitment to ensuring that nothing derails the important work of advancing psychiatry and mental health awareness.

As the Pakistan Psychiatric Society continues to grow, its mission remains clear: to create a country where mental health is recognized as a vital part of well-being, where treatment is accessible, and where compassion replaces stigma. The Karachi conference in November 2025 will be another step on this

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journey — one that promises to inspire, educate, and strengthen the collective resolve to make mental health a national priority.

The 26th National Psychiatric Conference is therefore not just an event but a statement: a statement that psychiatry in Pakistan continues to grow, to adapt, and to serve. It is a statement that, despite barriers, progress is possible; and that resilience is not merely a concept in textbooks but a living, breathing reality. For me, representing Mekran Medical College and the province of Balochistan, it is also a reminder that even when circumstances prevent us from gathering in our own cities, our voices and our contributions remain vital to the national discourse.

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