

Press Conference Speech by the President of Society of Family Physicians of Nigeria (SOFPON), Dr. Blessing Chukwukelu During The Occasion of 2025 World Family Doctor Day Celebration on the 19th of May, 2025

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It is with profound honor and a deep sense of purpose that I stand before you, as the President of the Society of Family Physicians of Nigeria (SOFPON), on this significant occasion: World Family Doctor Day. Today, we celebrate the very essence of our profession, the unwavering commitment of family doctors, and the pivotal role we play in the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities across Nigeria, and indeed, across the globe. World Family Doctor Day, observed annually on May 19th, is more than just a date on the calendar. It is a global movement, a moment of recognition, and a powerful reminder of the indispensable contributions of family doctors to the fabric of healthcare. This day, established by the World Organization of Family Doctors (WONCA) in 2010, serves to honour our dedication, highlight our achievements, and advocate for the strengthening of family medicine worldwide.¹

The choice of May 19th aligns with WONCA's founding in 1972 a landmark in uniting and empowering family practitioners across the globe. Why this focus on family doctors? The answer lies in the unique role we play as the first point of contact in most healthcare systems, serving as gatekeepers and care coordinators. We do not merely treat illnesses, we understand the patient in the context of family, culture, and community. We deliver continuity of care, personalized to the individual's needs across their life span.²

This year's theme, "Building Mental Resilience in a Changing World," is timely and essential. Mental health, which shapes how individuals think, feel, and act, is critical to overall well-being. It enables people to cope with stress, build relationships, and contribute meaningfully to society.¹ Yet, today's world is rife with stressors from technological disruption and social change to economic hardship and global crises. These have given rise to increased rates of depression, anxiety, and stress-related disorders globally and Nigeria is no exception.²

Local factors such as insecurity, economic instability, and limited access to mental health services exacerbate the problem. Mental illness in Nigeria carries a heavy burden. The stigma surrounding mental health causes many to suffer in silence. This results in delayed diagnoses, poor treatment outcomes, and persistent cycles of dysfunction.³ Compounding this issue is the dire shortage of mental health

professionals Nigeria has only about one psychiatrist per 700,000 people.⁴ This critical gap in specialized care is most deeply felt in rural and underserved areas.

Additionally, the absence of standardized and culturally appropriate mental health screening tools in primary care settings hinders early identification. Many family physicians and primary care staff lack training in basic mental health care, which limits their ability to detect and manage common mental illnesses.^{2,5}

A 2024 survey revealed widespread misconceptions about mental illness in Nigeria, including beliefs that it stems from spiritual causes or character flaws. These myths delay help-seeking behaviour and encourage the use of ineffective treatments.³ Amid these challenges, the role of the family physician is increasingly vital. Family doctors are often the first and sometimes only healthcare providers in the community. We are in a strategic position to conduct early mental health screenings using validated tools such as the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) and the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), which have shown success in Nigerian contexts.^{2,5,6}

Our community presence allows us to drive mental health education, combat stigma, and encourage help-seeking through outreach, awareness campaigns, and one-on-one patient education. With proper training, we can provide psychosocial support, counselling, and pharmacologic treatment when appropriate.⁵⁻⁸ We also act as the critical link to specialist services.² This model integrating mental health into primary care is endorsed by the World Health Organization for low- and middle-income countries. It reinforces the need for holistic, long-term, person-centred care as a cornerstone of national mental health strategies.⁶

Family physicians uniquely support mental wellness by building trust, recognizing early symptoms, and intervening before crises occur. We advocate for preventive lifestyle changes like balanced nutrition, physical activity, and restful sleep that bolster mental well-being. We help patients develop resilience: the capacity to bounce back from hardship and adapt to life's unpredictability.^{2,8,9}

Furthermore, the well-being of doctors directly impacts patient care. Physicians who prioritize their own mental health are more effective and fulfilled, and this translates to

improved patient outcomes. It is a virtuous cycle thriving doctors foster thriving communities.¹⁰

WONCA supports this by fostering a global network where family doctors share knowledge and experiences. This sense of solidarity enhances professional growth and emotional resilience.¹ Mental health is not about achieving perfect happiness but about cultivating adaptability, resilience, and purpose. We guide patients to develop agency the belief in their power to change and coherence the sense that life is meaningful and manageable.⁹

Key Messages for World Family Doctor Day:

- Primary care is a key platform for promoting mental health and preventing escalation of mental disorders.
- The well-being of family doctors and the health of their patients are mutually reinforcing.
- A healthy doctor contributes to a healthier, more resilient community.
- Compassionate listening and support are essential in fostering recovery and hope.
- Mental health is about resilience, not perfection – we aim to equip patients for life's realities.

As we gather here today, let us reaffirm our commitment to these principles. Let us pledge to continue to advocate for the importance of mental health, to work towards the integration of mental health services into primary care, and to empower our patients to build the resilience they need to thrive in a changing world. The challenges we face are significant, but they are not insurmountable. By working together, by collaborating across sectors, and by harnessing the power of our collective expertise, we can create a society that not only supports mental health but also fosters resilience, enabling individuals to live fulfilling lives, to reach their full potential, and to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

As the President of the Society of Family Physicians of Nigeria, I am proud to stand alongside you, my fellow family doctors, on this World Family Doctor Day. I am inspired by your dedication, your compassion, and your unwavering commitment to the health and well-being of our people.

Let us continue to be the advocates, the healers, and the pillars of strength that our patients and our communities need. Let us continue to build mental resilience, one individual, one family, one community at a time.

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