With her new-born cradled in her arms, Samantha sits comfortably on the floor of her room. Her dark eyes light up as she recognises Dr Pushpa Kumari Ranasinghe, a Consultant Psychiatrist at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) in Colombo. “Samantha is one of the mentally ill young mothers at our Perinatal Psychiatric Unit,” says Dr Ranasinghe, adding, “We have created a friendly, home-like environment for Samantha, as we do for all of our patients. We do not want to isolate young mothers suffering mental illness.”

Involving family in mental health care is integral to the mission of NIMH, which is Sri Lanka’s largest tertiary care institution for mental illness. The Perinatal Psychiatric Unit at the hospital consists of eight separate rooms, including a child-friendly room for consultation and counselling sessions during the day. Partners or other family members are encouraged to stay during the course of treatment.

“Gone are the days when mentally ill patients would be left, or very often abandoned, at a mental hospital by the family,” says Dr Jayan Mendis, Director at the facility. “Today, families are playing an important role in mental health care. This stems from our belief that patients with mental health problems have a right to a normal life. The Perinatal Psychiatric Unit is an example of the transformation which NIMH has gone through as it continues to evolve into a high quality institute that puts patient care first,” he emphasises.
WHO research shows that about 10 per cent of all pregnant women and 13 per cent of women who have just given birth experience a mental disorder, the most common of which is depression. In developing countries these figures are higher: 15.6% suffer problems during pregnancy, and 19.8% suffer them after giving birth. Maternal mental disorders are, however, treatable – a fact WHO and institutions like NIMH are promoting through community outreach programs.

Dr Neil Fernando at the Directorate of Health Services in Colombo says the need to be creative is apparent. “We have to address medical and social needs. We also have to involve social workers and volunteers as we reach out to the mentally ill who cannot access our services in hospitals. The role of health workers such as psychiatrists has to evolve to include consulting, teaching, supervising and working with a spectrum of health care workforce and volunteers in different settings. And it is evolving,” he explains.

T Suveendran, WHO Sri Lanka’s National Consultant for Mental Health, says these innovations are creating change for the better. “We are witnessing a sea-change in mental health care in Sri Lanka. The policymakers and practitioners are aware that different models of service delivery will have to be adopted in different parts of the island-country,” he says.

Mental health, once the most neglected problem in public health, is today considered crucial to the overall wellbeing and productivity of individuals, communities and countries. For young mentally ill mothers like Samantha, these mental health strategies are their lifeline to a healthier and happier future.