

Conference Report

Volunteering & International Psychiatry SIG and Transcultural Psychiatry SIG Joint Annual Conference 2025

Royal College of Psychiatrists

4 December 2025

The first joint annual conference of the Volunteering & International Psychiatry Special Interest Group (VIPSIG) and the Transcultural Psychiatry Special Interest Group (TSIG) marked a significant milestone for the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Held on 4 December 2025, the event was a resounding success — a testament to the vision and leadership of Dr Mostafa Shalaby, Chair of VIPSIG, and Dr Saima Niaz, Chair of TSIG, who together curated an exceptional programme highlighting global mental health innovation, cultural understanding, and compassionate psychiatric practice.

Plenary and Keynote Highlights

Our distinguished speakers delivered sessions of remarkable depth, insight, and humanity:

- Professor Subodh Dave, Dean of RCPsych, opened the conference with “Turning the World Upside Down – Lessons from Developing the Postgraduate Psychiatry Programme in Zambia.”

His presentation was a masterclass in innovation, collaboration, and sustainable system strengthening.

- Dr Mustafa Alachakar moved the audience with “Therapy Under the Bombs: Therapeutic Work at Times of War (Gaza).”

His reflections highlighted the courage, resilience, and ethical complexity of providing therapy in conflict zones.

- Dr Mostafa Shalaby and Professor Nandini Chakraborty delivered a powerful joint session:

“15 Years of War, 15 Years of Survival: A Conversation on Syria’s Mental Health Crisis,”

Offering vital insights into long-term trauma, endurance, and community resilience.

- Dr Chinwe Obinwa, President of the Black Asian Psychiatrists Association, inspired delegates with her session

“Embracing Our Power,”

Exploring identity, empowerment, and leadership within psychiatry.

- Professor Kamaldeep Bhui CBE delivered a brilliant and unifying talk,

“What Is Social and Cultural Psychiatry? Contrasts and Shared Spaces,” Bridging theory, practice, and cultural narratives in mental health.

- Dr Lade Smith CBE, President of RCPsych, gave an insightful Presidential Address that reflected on leadership, inclusivity, and shaping the future of psychiatry.

Her memorable message — “Be a swan, not a seagull” — encouraged practitioners to embrace grace, confidence, and purposeful action.

- Dr Hasanen Ali Al-Taib enriched the afternoon programme with

“Forensic and Cultural Psychiatry: Recovery, Agency, and Healing Across Contexts,”

Shedding light on the intersections of culture, justice, and recovery-oriented care.

Gratitude is extended to Dr Lachlan Fotheringham, Dr Sophie Thompson, Dr Saadia Alvi, and Dr Santosh Mudholkar for chairing sessions and supporting the smooth delivery of the programme.

Panel Discussion: Global and Cross-Cultural Psychiatry

A dynamic and thought-provoking panel discussion, chaired by Dr Fabida Aria (Former Chair – TSIG) and Dr Angela Misra (VIPSIG executive), brought together an accomplished group of experts:

- Dr Patrick Hughes – Founding member of VIPSIG, MHPSS expert, Trainer, Public mental health specialist
- Dr Suhana Ahmed – Deputy Medical Director, West London NHS Trust
- Dr Anis Ahmed – Former Chair of VIPSIG; President, Bangladeshi Psychiatrists Association
- Dr Nermeen Ahmed – Sudanese Doctors Association
- Professor Kam Bhui – Professor of Psychiatry, University of Oxford

Collectively, the panel provided comprehensive insights on international and cross-cultural psychiatric practice, emphasising the significance of culturally responsive and ethically sound mental healthcare.

Key Themes Explored

- Task-sharing and workforce challenges:

With many regions experiencing shortages of psychiatrists, panellists shared insights gained from working with non-specialist providers, including experiences from volunteering sectors.

- Trauma-informed care across cultures:

Speakers highlighted the importance of tailoring trauma-informed approaches to cultural norms, collective histories, and diverse understandings of distress.

- Ethical dilemmas in international work:

Themes included navigating autonomy and safeguarding, differing cultural expectations, and maintaining ethical integrity across diverse settings.

- Competencies for global mental health practice:

Cultural humility, flexibility, communication, collaborative working, and ethical reasoning were identified as essential competencies beyond core clinical expertise.

- Integration with community structures:

Examples highlighted the value of mutual respect, community leadership, and adapting care models to local needs to build sustainable partnerships.

Audience Engagement and Contributions.

Delegates actively participated in discussions, showing particular interest in:

- The purpose and value of ethnicity recording,
- How data can be used to improve equity, access, and outcomes, and
- Sharing experiences from international volunteering.

It was noted that several NHS Trusts already provide special leave for volunteering, and a working group will be established to explore broader implementation across the system.

Closing Reflections

In his concluding commentary, Professor Kam Bhui reflected on the complexities of categorisation within psychiatry, emphasising the importance of nuance, cultural understanding, and thoughtful interpretation of identity-related data.

Special acknowledgement was given to:

- Dr Fabida Aria, former TSIG Chair, for her long-standing leadership in transcultural psychiatry.
- Dr Anis Ahmed, former VIPSIG Chair, for his dedicated contributions to international volunteering and cross-SIG development.

We are also deeply grateful to Dr Abdul Rauf, DME and Associate Dean (Advanced Learning), for his ongoing support.

Awards and Recognitions

An appreciation ceremony honoured individuals for their exceptional service:

- Dr Peter Hughes – Founder and Outstanding Contributor, VIPSIG
- Dr Sophia Thompson and Dr Anis Ahmed – VIPSIG Outstanding Contributor Award
- Dr Fabida Aria and Professor Kamaldeep Bhui – TSIG Outstanding Contributor Awards

Final Thoughts

This inaugural VIPSIG–TSIG joint conference showcased the very best of collaboration, cultural insight, volunteering and global leadership in mental health. We extend our heartfelt

thanks to every speaker, participant, volunteer, and colleague whose presence and engagement brought the event to life.

Sincere appreciation is extended to the entire Executive Committee and the RCPsych Team for their tireless behind-the-scenes efforts, ensuring a seamless and inspiring day that brought together clinicians, academics, trainees, and volunteers from around the world.

We look forward to continuing this shared journey.

Your suggestions, ideas, and involvement are warmly welcomed. Please approach us directly or contact us through the RCPsych website.