UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI

SPEECH BY THE VICE-CHANCELLOR, UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI, PROF. PETER M.F. MBITHI, DURING THE 8TH ANNUAL PAN-AFRICAN PCAF PSYCHOTRAUMA CONFERENCE ON “TRAUMA AND MENTAL HEALTH ACROSS THE LIFESPAN” HELD AT THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA ON JULY 14, 2015
The Vice-Chancellor, Catholic University of Eastern Africa

The Chairman, Mount Kenya University

The Vice-Chancellor, Mount Kenya University

The Vice-Chancellor, Presbyterian University of Eastern Africa

Dr. Steve Alderman

Other distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen,
I feel greatly privileged to be addressing you all today. This conference is truly one of a kind, bringing together those in academia, with beneficiaries of their work, and other stakeholders in this area together to interact and deliberate thus opening doors to better understanding of roles.

The issue of psychotrauma is fast becoming a pertinent issue with recent global and local events forcing a shift in thought on the long-term impact of exposure to traumatic events. In Kenya, we are indeed blessed to have avoided the devastating consequences of prolonged war and armed conflict within our borders in recent times. However, the impact of events such as the 2007/2008 post-election violence and other recent events continue to be felt.
Although many of those who were physically injured have healed from their visible wounds, it is becoming more and more apparent that the impact of violence on such a scale goes much deeper than what we can visibly perceive. The horror witnessed by victims and survivors etches and imprints itself on their minds.

The terrorist attacks witnessed in our country such as the Westgate mall attack and for those of us like myself in learning institutions, the one that hit closest to home, the Garissa University attack, have demonstrated that the effect on victims is much more than what is perceived by the eye. We have seen how difficult it has been for not only survivors, but even others who were not present in these areas at the
time of the event to now venture into them. Students have preferred to study elsewhere, and the public is still apprehensive regarding the planned re-opening of the Westgate mall.

It is for this reason that a forum such as this is not only useful but necessary to address the harms caused which, though we may not see them, interfere with the normal functioning of the person and eventually impact on his/her contribution to the society with consequences going beyond generations.

I am grateful to the main sponsor of this conference, the Peter C. Alderman Foundation, and particularly Steve and Liz Alderman for turning personal tragedy into an
opportunity to serve others. The loss of a child is indeed devastating, and more so at the hands of terrorists. I applaud the Foundation for spearheading psychotrauma interventions in conflict areas which would otherwise have had no respite. With a current total of seven clinics dedicated to training local health workers and the development of trauma treatment systems, the Foundation is indeed living up to its mission of healing the emotional wounds of survivors.

I would also like to give special mention to Africa Mental Health Foundation who have done a wonderful job organizing this conference. Prof. Ndetei has always been a strong mental health advocate and it is my belief that the work that
Africa Mental Health Foundation is doing in research for interventions in mental health will in the end revolutionize policy and practice in this area in Kenya. I know of their success in getting local county governments to consider integrating mental health services in primary care and once this is accomplished successfully, other counties will be able to learn and replicate the model, leading to increased access to affordable, quality mental health services countrywide.

I admit that issues of mental health and psychotrauma in the modern understanding are still somewhat foreign concepts in this part of the world. Many go undiagnosed and untreated due to lack of information.
The stigma associated with anything related to mental health also hinders many from seeking treatment. Access to services is still limited for majority of the population due to factors such as the prohibitive cost of treatment and lack of adequate numbers of trained professionals.

However, the work done by organizations like the Peter C. Alderman Foundation and Africa Mental Health Foundation gives rays of hope. The integrated approach used is indeed innovative and offers a friendly face to the process.

The University of Nairobi is proud to be associated with this conference. It has given us an opportunity to show our support, even if in a small way, to the work being accomplished by the Peter C. Alderman Foundation.
We at the University of Nairobi are committed to growing research in Kenya and support all efforts to provide evidence-based interventions in all areas. We are therefore happy to be part of such a forum to discuss what emanates from tried and tested studies.

Nobody knows what the future will bring and the rising cases of extremism are indeed cause for concern. The ensuing violence has rocked many parts of the world and given rise to hatred, divisions and strife among communities. These issues have even found their way to our doorsteps. The causes of trauma are also vast, including natural calamities and accidents.
It is therefore imperative that we find ways to help the affected by having trauma interventions as part and parcel of our healthcare services to ensure things do not get out of hand.

Thank you and we hope to continue this rich tradition and even have this conference again next year.

**PETER M.F MBITHI, PhD, EBS**
VICE CHANCELLOR

AND

**PROFESSOR OF VETERINARY SURGERY**