A mental health community outreach program in Fiji that helps to increase community understanding and acceptance of people living with mental illness has been recognised with an international award.

Mental disorders affect nearly 12 per cent of the world’s population—approximately 450 million people around the world. People with a mental illness are often isolated and struggle to find work or participate in education because of a lack of understanding within the community. The community outreach program at St Giles Psychiatric Hospital in Suva is trying to break down these barriers and reach out to communities to increase awareness and understanding of mental illness.

This work was recognised in 2009 when St Giles Psychiatric Hospital’s community outreach team won the Asian Federation of Psychiatric Associations’ international excellence award. Dr Odille Chang, Chief Medical Officer at St Giles, said the award recognised the team’s efforts, which included basic mental health services training for community nurses. She said the award would not have been possible without the Australian Government’s support of $15 million over six years through the Fiji Health Sector Improvement Program.

‘The award for excellence recognised the efforts made to make mental health services available to communities. This would not have been possible without the Australian Government’s support, which has enabled us to take mental health services to communities, destigmatise mental illness, and encourage people to seek the psychiatric assistance they may require,’ Dr Chang said.

In January 2010, the Australian Government gave mental health services in Fiji an added boost. A new van will help St Giles Psychiatric Hospital’s Community Mental Health Outreach Program access communities to support people living with mental illness.

When handing over the keys, Sarah Goulding, the Counsellor for AusAID in Fiji, said: ‘I’m delighted to be handing across the keys of this beautiful new vehicle. I’m sure it will travel many miles over its life and be of great use to hospital staff in the very important work that they do with people with mental illness.’

Fiji’s Deputy Secretary for Public Health, Dr Jo Koroivueta, said: ‘Lack of transport is one of the many problems we face here at the Ministry of Health and this kind donation will go a long way to ensure that we are able to do our work better and more efficiently.’

A B O V E: Counsellor for AusAID in Fiji, Sarah Goulding, hands over the keys to a new van to the Fiji Ministry of Health to be used by St Giles Hospital for community outreach work.

Photo: Tony de la Fosse/Australian High Commission in Fiji

The Fiji Health Sector Improvement Program is a $15 million initiative to improve health services in Fiji. The program also supports the Fiji Ministry of Health in rural health, clinical services, management training and infrastructure.