

The Interaction between Health Care and Society

The terms “Health Care” and “Society” are both very broad subject areas in their own right. “Health Care” is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as:

“The prevention, treatment, and management of illness and the preservation of mental and physical well-being through the services offered by the medical and allied health professions.”

Whilst “Society” is defined as:

“the aggregate of people living together in a more or less ordered community”

After carefully considering the title of this assignment and due to the size and time limits I have decided to focus on a particular area of health which is mental illness. I wanted to explore how mental illness is perceived by and how it interacts with society and to look at improvements if any that could be made to improve the relationship between the two.

Mental health is an area that interests me, firstly, because it is a subject that I wanted to research further as I have only ever read negative sensationalist views on it in the papers and on the news eg when someone with a mental problem murders an innocent random person. Secondly because two close family members of mine suffer depression, one a recently diagnosed adult and the other a child with autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and bouts of severe depression. In addition, I have an adult friend who is a nurse caring for Alzheimer patients who has told me of her experience of working with people with mental illness.

Mental health is a huge field and I can only describe a limited number of conditions and aspects of it in this piece of work. Where possible I have tried to use relatively current information. Mental health problems are very common with 1 in 4 people diagnosed with some form of mental illness during their life. 10% of children and 1 in 5 over 60 year olds will suffer some form of mental illness during their lives. Anxiety and depression are the most common mental disorders. Others include bipolar, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder, Alzheimer’s, eating disorders etc. Post Traumatic stress has been in the news a lot lately as many war veterans have suffered with it (*source: Mental Health Foundation*).

Interestingly a survey of almost 2000 people carried out by the *National Statistic Office* in 2010 found that only 16% of respondents were aware of the fact that 1 in 4 of the population would be diagnosed with mental illness at some time in their life.

Another survey published in April 2012 by the *Department for Work and Pensions* found that 10,000 working days at a cost of 100 billion were lost last year in the UK due to stress and depression. There is plenty of data and research done by various organisations on the statistics surrounding mental health. I feel the question needs to be asked why have all these surveys been carried out, yet the ignorance and negativity by society towards mental illness is still prevalent?

It could be argued that changes need first to be made by policy makers within the healthcare services. Several sources I have read suggest that mental health care is not regarded as a priority; I have also spoken to my sources mentioned above about this issue. *Max Pemberton* talks in his autobiography about visiting a psychiatric ward for the first time during his training as a doctor, He compares the run down décor and old furniture in the ward with that of the bright newly decorated wards in the rest of the hospital, he states:

"On billboards outside there are enormous pictures of sweet, doe eyed children advertising a new pediatric ward due to be opened next year. The public like the idea that their taxes are being spent on exciting heart-warming things like helping sick children...when psychiatric wards are eventually refurbished there is no fanfare, no grand openings no photo shoots. The popular image of psychiatric patients is of doped-up people in straitjackets. Pictures of them on a bill board are never going to be a crowd pleaser "

My friend who works in an Alzheimer's ward told me that when the big freeze occurred last year Nurses were transported into work in chauffeured four wheeled drive vehicles so that emergency care could still be given to patients. However, no vehicles were allocated to nurses in her ward as it was not considered a priority service. Yet, as she pointed out her patients were amongst the most vulnerable and many didn't have relatives visiting who could help with their care.

My relative with an autistic child suffering from depression told me about her difficulties in getting help in an emergency after her child tried to jump from a first floor window. She could not take him to casualty as he was not physically hurt; the NHS helpline merely suggested seeing her GP when convenient. The Paediatrician who prescribed the medication was away and could not be contacted. There was no-one else to turn to at that difficult

time. She feels the issue of mental health is “brushed under the carpet” both by some medical staff and also society in general:

“my son is isolated from other children as he is different and I’m isolated from other parents as most of them have no idea what it’s like to have a child suffering severe depression, if I talk about it with friends, they tend to change the subject, they just don’t understand”

Of course there are dedicated staff working in all areas of Health Care and these examples should not be generalised.

According to the ***Mental Health Foundation*** there is evidence to suggest that stigma within society toward mental illness is a major issue. People often avoid or even mock mental health as it makes them feel uncomfortable. This is largely due to inherent beliefs and ignorance about mental illness. The tabloids regularly use words such as ‘psycho’ and ‘bonkers’ to describe people with mental illness and this encourages the public to believe that it’s acceptable to fear and ridicule it. Due to this lack of knowledge and the influence of stereotypes in the media, the general public tend to view the mentally ill as ***“unpredictable, responsible for their bizarre beliefs and behaviour, incapable of rational thought, and probably dangerous.”***

The ignorance, stigma and fear felt by society towards mental illness is further described by ***Theo Bello*** a Mental Health Nursing Manager (***The Independent***) who argues that when a murderer is mentally ill the fear felt within society is inflamed and sensationalized by the media . Tragic though these cases are, the reality is that the chance of an individual being murdered by someone with a psychosis is extremely rare, about one in ten million – the same as being struck by lightning. Violence is not a typical symptom of mental illness yet that is a difficult concept for society to accept. He states:

“When these beliefs, fear and stigma filter through society it is not surprise that the mentally ill often find themselves socially excluded and isolated. The ignorance society feels about mental illness encourages feelings of shame in sufferers and discourages people to seek treatment or even to admit that symptoms they may be experiencing may be related to a mental illness.”

The stigmatization by society towards mental illness is supported by my adult relative suffering with depression who told me he would not visit the doctor for many months as he hoped it would go away on his own:

“I wish I was physically ill, broken a leg or something, rather than depressed so people could see something was wrong with me, I want to take time off work without being embarrassed and ashamed to admit to everyone what’s really wrong with me”

I feel it is rather a sad reflection on society that the stigma, fear and ignorance about mental illness means that sufferers feel isolated as they do not fit into the neat definition of society as an “*ordered community*” (see definition para 1. above)

A recently published list of UK charities and the donations made to them makes interesting reading. The Top charities classed as receiving over 10m a year in donations include Cancer Research, NSPCC, (National Society Prevention of Cruelty to Children) Oxfam, RSPCA (Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) do not include any “mental health charities. The Samaritans which is the mental health charity with the highest donations raised 6.7m in 2010. The tragic death of marathon runner Claire Squires in April 2012 resulted in a huge surge in donations to the Samaritans with over 1m donated in a couple of weeks. However, even with this input it is highly unlikely to raise as much as the Donkey Sanctuary Charity which received 18.5m in 2010 mainly from legacies (*The Guardian*). Donations and legacies to mental health charities do not seem to be a popular option even considering the number of sufferers.

From my admittedly brief research it would appear that there is still some way to go in improving society’s perception of mental illness and therefore the interaction between the two.

However, this is not intended to be a one-sided negative view about society and mental illness as definite improvements in mental health care have been made over the years. Prisoners after the world wars were known to be suffering with “shell shock” but counseling was not considered necessary at that time. Now, Post Traumatic Stress is a recognized symptom of many war veterans. Workplaces commonly offer stress counseling to staff to help prevent costly sick days. My adult relative suffering depression has been offered counseling in addition to medication. However, he has had to wait many months to receive it and then it is in a group session which may not be acceptable to many sufferers.

An *Auditor General* report published last year found that improvements have been made in adult mental health care but inequalities still remain. There has been a move away from inpatient mental health care to community care and there is now a broader range of services available eg. treatment at home. Generally community care rather than in-patient treatment for mental illnesses is better accepted by society than when the concept was first introduced. Significant findings from the report include that since 2005 there has been an increase in the numbers of counsellors, psychotherapists, psychologists and community mental health staff trained

in psychological therapies. Unfortunately, many GPs and practice staff have not received mental health training within the last three years, and limited progress has been made in increasing the number of GPs with specialist skills in mental health. Psychology therapy services waiting times can be very long and are often in excess of Government targets.

Although improvements have been made over the years in mental health care I feel there is still some way to go in improving society's perception of it. I found out doing this research that last week from May 21st to 27th was "**Mental Health Awareness Week**" championed by the Mental Health Foundation. Health and Social Care students from Long Eaton School in Derbyshire planned and implemented a health promotion campaign to challenge stereotypes about mental illness from pupils within the school. They carried out community activities some involving disabled and mentally ill people (www.mentalhealth.org.uk). I think this is an excellent idea but I have not heard of any similar campaigns around this area and I have not seen anything on the television or papers promoting "**Mental Health Awareness Week**".

According to *Bello, 2011* changes in attitude to mental health needs to start within the health service. Mental health nursing is the least popular area of nursing as it can be very demanding, sometimes traumatic but he points out it is also rewarding. He says good communication skills, empathy, maturity and respect are key skills in being a good mental health nurse, along with a commitment to build a strong therapeutic relationship with patients and colleagues. He feels improved and specialized staff training would go a long way to improving current mental health services and may encourage more people to go into this area of nursing. He is of the opinion that specialized community housing with a close-knit support group of mental health workers would be the most effective solution for mental health care long term.

The media is an obvious starting place for improving society's perception of mental health. On May 12th 2012 the painting *The Scream* made headlines in newspapers and on TV across the world for fetching \$119 m the highest price ever at auction. The painting is understood to be an image of an individual suffering from mental health problems who feels isolated from society. The painter had suffered a nervous breakdown and had a sister living in an asylum (*Prideux 2005*).

It is ironic that this painting has received so much positive publicity recently yet the subject it portrays is still not widely accepted or understood by society. Maybe this current glamorous publicity is a good starting point for policy makers in the Government, Health care, Social and Education services to collaborate and promote mental health awareness amongst society.



Edvard Munch the Scream 1893

I think The Government should initiate a campaign to promote mental illness and healthcare using TV advertising, encouraging documentaries, radio broadcasting, even adverts in cinemas. Mental Health charities, schools and colleges could be involved and there could be a national competition to compile a slogan, along the lines of that used by the National Autistic Society: ***“Accept difference not indifference”*** Other successful campaigns have been carried out e.g. saving the environment and recycling so why not improve societies view on mental health?

Of course it would be a massive challenge and extremely costly so it is unlikely to happen in this current difficult economic climate. However, when you weigh it against the money lost to the economy due to mental illness I feel it would be money well spent.

To conclude this piece of research, I have focused on a single area of health care ie mental health and concentrated on society’s perception of it and how it interacts with sufferers. My findings showed that significant advances have been made in mental health care over recent years but there is still room for further improvement. Overcoming the stigma, fear and general ignorance felt by society toward mental illness is a massive challenge and will take many years to achieve. I believe that this challenge is achievable with the co-operation of the Government, various services, and media and of course the general public.

In my opinion only when the stigma, fear and ignorance are overcome can the interaction between Mental Health Care and Society be regarded as truly successful.

Katy Baran

***“You hurry on by and try not to stare
but I have not disappeared , Im still there
my arms are trembling, my words don’t sound clear
my dishevelled looks have caused you some fear
I don’t fit into your organised life
with career, friends, children and wife
you say “ its not my problem , what can I do?”
BUT... I could be your loved one, I could be you”***

T. and K. Baran- May 2012

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