Physical health issues for consumers of mental health services

There is a substantial amount of research that tells us that physical health and mental health are critically linked. Research also indicates that the physical health of people with a mental illness, including consumers of mental health services, is poor.

As a GP, you’re probably already aware that many people with a mental illness have a reduced life expectancy and are diagnosed with, or have an increased risk of developing, serious health issues, such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer and obesity. Factors that contribute to the range of illnesses and conditions consumers suffer include smoking, alcohol consumption and other drug use, poor diet, lack of exercise, regular use of psychotropic medication and high risk behaviours.

The poor health of consumers is also linked to their reduced access to appropriate assessment and treatment of their physical health issues. Consumers often feel that once they’ve received a diagnosis for their mental illness, their physical health is neglected. Additionally, they can experience stigma and communication difficulties that affect their ability to seek medical help.

Taking a ‘holistic’ approach to care for consumers

In recognition of the need to improve the physical health of consumers, mental health services in NSW now have a documented responsibility to ensure the consumers involved with their service are provided with appropriate physical health care.

Many mental health services already consider the physical health needs of mental health consumers. However, the adoption of a consistent, statewide approach to existing practices will give all consumers the opportunity to improve their physical health, and ultimately their overall well-being.

The NSW Health Policy Directive PD2009_027 Provision of Physical Health Care within Mental Health Services provides clear direction regarding the actions mental health services must take regarding the provision of physical health care. Comprehensive information and advice to help mental health services meet their obligations are provided in the NSW Health Physical Health Care of Mental Health Consumers Guidelines (GL2009_007).

The critical role of the GP

As a GP, you have a critical role to play in helping mental health consumers improve their physical health.

The GP is often the first point of contact for people with a mental health illness or disorder, which means they can identify and start treatment for physical health issues as early as possible.

GPs have a critical role to play in helping mental health consumers to improve their physical health.
Building better health care partnerships

Mental health services will be developing and implementing strategies to improve partnership arrangements with local GPs. These partnerships will be critical in supporting consumers to access appropriate physical health care.

As a GP, you can help by:

- Informing your local mental health service of the best time to contact you for information about the physical health of any consumers you might be treating
- Agreeing to be placed on a register with the local mental health service so that consumers that are not currently engaged with a GP can be put in touch with you
- Encouraging consumers to consent to share information about their physical health with their mental health service, if this is in their best interest
- Attending lunchtime or evening forums for networking, information exchange and educational initiatives for GPs and mental health workers in the area
- Ensuring you have a copy of the Physical Health Mental Health Handbook, available from the Better Health Centre and General Practice NSW (see below for contact details)
- Looking at ways you may be able to support consumers to better access your service, such as by visiting the mental health service to conduct physical assessments or devoting a specific timeslot (ie beginning of the day, end of the day) at your practice for consumer appointments.

As many consumers have a high level of interest in and commitment to improving their physical health, GPs can also provide information and support to consumers, as well as their families or carers, regarding physical health or lifestyle issues.

To help GPs work with and treat consumers, NSW Health has recently revised and re-released the Physical Health Mental Health Handbook. Originally developed as a collaborative project between NSW Health and General Practice NSW (formerly the Alliance of NSW Divisions of General Practice), the Handbook is a resource developed specifically for GPs and clinicians to help them to provide both physical and mental health care to consumers. Limited numbers of this resource are available free of charge from the Better Health Centre or General Practice NSW – see below for contact details.

The importance of collaboration between mental health services and GPs

While NSW mental health services have an important responsibility to consider and address the physical health needs of consumers in their care, services recognise that outside of inpatient settings, GPs are the primary providers of physical health care for consumers. This makes you, as the consumer’s GP, an integral part of the care team. It also means that a collaborative partnership between you and the consumer’s mental health service is a vital component of the consumer’s care.

Collaboration between GPs and mental health services is particularly significant for services delivered in the community. GPs can offer support to their local community mental health service by conducting physical examinations of consumers and providing information about the consumer’s physical health history.

However, a significant proportion of consumers don’t have a regular GP. While this is due to a variety of reasons, developing and maintaining a strong working relationship with the mental health service in your local area can help to make your practice more accessible to consumers in your community.

Consumers who don’t have a regular GP can talk to their mental health service about being linked with a GP in their locality that has experience in treating people with a mental illness, or has an interest in gaining this experience. If you’re a GP that would like to register your interest in supporting consumers in your area, contact your local mental health service. You can find the contact details for the mental health service in your locality by visiting the NSW Health website http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/healthcentre/localsearch.html

Sharing information

Consumers who have a regular GP will be encouraged to share the GP’s contact information with their mental health service. This will support the service and the GP to work together to help the consumer to improve their physical health. However, mental health service staff will ask the consumer for their consent before they contact you, or the consumer’s other health providers, such as their dentist, for information about the consumer’s health or to request they conduct specific tests or investigations.

It’s important to note here that both GPs and mental health services are bound by confidentiality requirements.

Confidentiality relating to clinical records and personal information is subject to both ethical and legal protection, and managers of mental health services will ensure that staff are aware of their obligations under the Mental Health Act 2007 and the Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002.

Need more information?

- Contact your local mental health service (contact details available from the above website)
- Access the Physical Health Mental Health Handbook from the Better Health Centre on 02 9887 5450 or General Practice NSW on 9239 2900