Linking physical and mental health care...

it makes sense

FOR MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Taking a 'holistic' approach to care

There is a substantial amount of research that tells us that physical health and mental health are critically linked, so it's important that people with a mental illness or disorder receive good quality physical as well as mental health care.

Mental health services now have an important responsibility to ensure that the consumers involved with their service have access to such health care by taking a ‘holistic’ or ‘whole of health’ approach. This means considering the physical as well as mental aspects of a consumers health.

Specifically, mental health services need to:

- Support all consumers to receive a physical examination.
- Exclude physical causes for the consumer’s mental illness or disorder.
- Minimise the risk of poor physical health outcomes due to any treatment for the consumer’s mental illness.
- Put consumers in contact with appropriate health providers for required health reviews or tests.
- Make sure care plans for consumers address physical health needs and ongoing physical health issues.
- Provide access to activities and information that will help to improve the consumer’s overall health and wellbeing.

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 in this regard.

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). Both these documents are available from www.health.nsw.gov.au.

Principles of care

The following six Principles have been developed to support the ethical provision of physical health care by mental health services.

As a mental health worker, you should discuss these Principles with your manager or work colleagues so that you understand their application in your workplace.

1 Mental health consumers are entitled to quality, evidence based care and treatment for all aspects of their health, including their physical health.

2 Such care and treatment for mental health consumers:

- Is delivered in a respectful, non-judgemental and culturally sensitive way, with information about their illness, physical condition and treatment options provided to enable them to make informed choices
- Recognises consumers as critical partners in the care team
- Involves their families and carers, with the consent, wherever possible, of consumers.

Physical health and mental health are linked, so it makes sense to link physical and mental health care.
Empowering consumers to improve their physical health

If consumers are to be active participants in their own physical health care, they need information about:

- Their physical health diagnosis
- Treatment options for any physical health issues, including risks, benefits and potential side effects
- How such treatment may interact with any prescribed medication for their mental illness
- How the prescribed medication for their mental illness may impact on their physical health
- The agreed treatment plan for their physical health issues
- Any planned follow up care.

Consumers should also be provided with information regarding the responsibilities of the mental health service in relation to physical health care (see NSW Health brochure Physical health care – what to expect from your Mental Health Service available from the Better Health Centre) as well as advice about health and nutrition issues and available healthy lifestyle programs.

3 The physical health of mental health consumers is considered by mental health services in the planning and provision of any mental health interventions.

4 Working collaboratively with other health providers, particularly GPs, is key to providing quality physical health care for mental health consumers.

5 Physical health care includes access to health promotion, screening and preventative activities.

6 The provision of physical health care is responsive to issues such as consumer preferences, gender, ethnicity, English proficiency and age.

The importance of collaborating with GPs

GPs have a critical role to play in helping consumers to improve their physical health. They are often the first point of contact for people with a mental health illness or disorder, which gives them the opportunity to provide early identification of and treatment for a consumer’s physical health issues.

However, if you’re a mental health worker, you would know that there are a significant number of consumers who don’t have a regular GP.

Your mental health service can help consumers to access a GP by establishing strong working relationships with the GPs in your local area. Strategies to support your service to do this can be found in the NSW Health Physical Health Care of Mental Health Consumers Guidelines. This is particularly important for community mental health services, where the consumer’s GP can conduct physical examinations and provide information about the consumer’s physical health history.

To support services to communicate with GPs, and encourage them to register their interest in working with the service and consumers in the locality, the following resources are available from the Better Health Centre (see below for contact details):

- The Physical Health Mental Health Handbook, a resource developed to support the identification and treatment of physical health issues for consumers (limited revision and reprint).
- An information sheet for GPs about providing physical health care to consumers in collaboration with services.

Sharing information with other health providers

If you’re aware that a consumer who uses your service has a regular GP, you should encourage them to share their GP’s contact information with your service. This will give your service the opportunity to work together with the GP to help the consumer improve their physical health. However, services must ask consumers for their consent before any contact is made with their GP or other health providers (e.g., dentist, dietician).

While sharing information about the consumer’s mental and physical health has real benefits for the consumer, its important to note that mental health services and GPs 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 must ensure that staff are aware of their obligations under the Mental Health Act 2007 and the Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002.

While the requirements of these Acts allow for information in connection with the further treatment of a consumer to be exchanged, respect for confidentiality of personal information acquired by mental health services and other health care providers in the course of their business is given the highest priority. Additionally, whenever necessary, consent must be sought from the consumer for disclosure of information.

If you need further information, refer to the NSW Health Privacy Manual (Version 2, 27).

Need more information?

- See the NSW Health Physical Health Care of Mental Health Consumers Guidelines available at: www.health.nsw.gov.au
- Talk to your line manager or work colleagues about how to implement these Guidelines
- Access relevant resources, information sheets and brochures from the Better Health Centre on 02 9887 5450