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Improving the physical health of people with mental health problems: Actions for mental health nurses-a new resource

Problem: People with mental health problems have poorer physical health than the general population, often they are unable to access the physical health care they need and experience health inequalities. Contact with mental health services does not necessarily mean they will have their physical health assessed and monitored, nor receive the information and support they need to adopt a healthier lifestyle. Those with severe mental illness die on average 15-20 years earlier than the general population.

Method: To improve the physical health outcomes of people with mental health problems we surveyed all organizations in England providing mental health services (54) and universities providing mental health training programmes (48). The survey identified 8 areas for improvement: support to quit smoking; tackling obesity; improving physical activity levels; reducing alcohol and substance use; sexual and reproductive health; medicine optimization: dental and oral health and reducing falls. Examples of good practice were identified.

Results: Many organizations addressed various physical health needs but none were providing services that met all patients' physical health needs. Successful interventions included offering physical health screening, promoting healthier lifestyles and creating smoke-free environments.

Conclusion and significance: Mental health nurses have unparalleled opportunities to help people improve their physical health. This resource helps them to identify the key risk factors that are known to adversely affect the physical health of people with mental health problems. By following the activities to achieve change, drawing from the available evidence and learning from the good practice examples in this resource, they can build up their confidence and expertise and make improvements to people's health outcomes. Since publication, mental health services have used the resource to develop their strategies improving the physical health of people with mental health problems and a number of universities now base their physical health curricular upon this resource.

Biography

Ben Thomas is the Professor of Mental Health and Learning Disabilities at London South Bank University, England. He is also the Expert Adviser for Mental Health and Patient Safety at NHS Improvement, England and Chairs the Independent Advisory Group for the Confidential Inquiry into Homicides and Suicides. He is a member of the UK Expert Committee on Mental Health Nursing and a Trustee and Director for a number of third sector organizations including Together for Mental Health Wellbeing. His current research activities include improving the physical health of people with mental health problems and reducing suicide both within mental health inpatient facilities and Acute General Hospitals.

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