

There Is No Mental Health Without Caregivers

Despite the fact that a number of international initiatives on mental health have appeared in recent years (e. g. WHO Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2020¹ and the European Joint Action for Mental Health and Well-being 2013²), it has been observed that caregivers (partners, parents or close friends etc.) of people experiencing mental illness have yet to gain an independent, political and formal recognition of their importance to mental health from the international community. The lack of solid perspectives, objectives or goals in existing action plans for mental health is particularly troubling, considering that research carried out over the past 30 years has demonstrated that continued involvement of caregivers is essential to the recovery process of people with mental illness³. Caring is not a free resource and for those around the world who are already confronted with a range of problems, mental illness may have a significant impact on the entire family system, as well as larger scale effects on socio-economic conditions and national productivity⁴. If we want caregivers to be competent partners in the treatment of people experiencing mental illness, which is the only way to ensure a high quality of mental health services, then there is an urgent need for international attention on their role, which should result in clearly-defined strategies and policy making⁵. In addition to establishing a central focus on caregivers in international mental health policy, member states can also help to share knowledge, experiences, research and guidelines with respect to legislation, rights and codes of practice. In other words, it is crucial to enforce national laws and international conventions designed to protect caregivers and to facilitate greater access to information and support. With the international community playing an active role, we can finally start to take advantage of the underutilized benefits of caregiver involvement by prioritizing caregiving through international initiatives, thereby helping to develop a sustainable psychiatry for patients, doctors and family members. I therefore call on the international community to include this perspective in all mental health-related goals. We cannot afford to lose the aid of caregivers, who offer an enormous and unique opportunity to ensure healthy lives and overall well-being for society.

*Jens Peter Dam Eckardt Jensen, chief analyst at BEDRE PSYKIATRI Research Unit, Livjærggade 20, 2100 Copenhagen, Denmark. jp-mail@hotmail.com / jpi@bedrepsykiatri.dk

BEDRE PSYKIATRI is the Danish association of caregivers of the mentally ill.

I declare no competing interest

¹ WHO. Draft comprehensive mental health action plan 2013–2020. May 16, 2013. http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA66/A66_10Rev1-en.pdf (accessed June 3, 2013).

² EU. Joint Action for Mental Health and Well-being. 2013. <http://www.mentalhealthandwellbeing.eu/>

³ McFarlane WR. Multifamily Groups in the Treatment of Severe Psychiatric Disorders. New York & London: Guilford Press; 2002.

⁴ Sartorius N, Leff J, López-Ibor JJ, Maj M and Okasha A. Families and Mental Disorders: From Burden to Empowerment (eds), John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Chichester, UK. 2004.

⁵ Knapp M, McDaid D, Mossialos E, Thornicroft G. Mental health policy and practice across Europe: European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies Series: The future direction of mental health care: Open University Press; 2007.