**Improving the physical health of people with mental health problems.**

Emeritus Professor Alan Glasper, from the University of Southampton, discusses the looming crisis in managing the physical health of people with mental health problems .

**Introduction**

In May 2016 the Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Professions Policy Unit of NHS England

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/>

published a new policy intended primarily as a resource for mental health nurses, entitled “*Improving the physical health of people with mental health problems: Actions for mental health nurses”*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524571/Improving_physical_health_A.pdf>

This policy has been published in response to a report from the independent Mental Health Taskforce to the NHS England published in February 2016. This document entitled “*The five year forward view for mental health”*

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Mental-Health-Taskforce-FYFV-final.pdf>

shows that physical and mental health are closely linked and that people with severe and prolonged mental illness are at risk of dying on average 15 to 20 years earlier than other people. This is because the long-term consequences of mental

illness are also reflected in deteriorating physical health. (Glasper 2016). This represents one of the greatest health inequalities in England and the Five Year Forward publication illuminates the reality that two thirds of these deaths are from avoidable physical illnesses, including heart disease and cancer, with many of the morbidities being caused many caused by tobacco smoking. This situation has arisen because all too often the NHS has operated a system where it treats the co morbidities of patient’s minds and bodies separately. The new policy from the Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Professions Policy Unit of NHS England seeks to tackle some of the issue related to preserving the physical health of people with mental health problems.

The intention is that by 2020/21 at least 280,000 more people living with severe mental health problems will have their physical health needs identified and met primarily through the greater utilization of the skills of mental health nurses. NHS England believes that mental health nurses are crucial to achieving their targets and that they should be empowered to make the most of the opportunities they have in ensuring that the people with mental illness they care for have their physical health needs addressed through early detection and access to best evidence based practice interventions. The resource for mental health nurses embodied within this new policy is designed to ensure that people living with mental health problems have the same access to health checks and healthcare as the general population. It highlights evidence based information about the optimum pathways that mental health nurses can take to positively improve the physical health and wellbeing of people living with mental health problems

**Background**

The current government has given a commitment to ensure put the physical health of patients with mental health problems or learning disabilities are given equal priority with other service users in the NHS. This new policy recognises that mental health nurses are in a prime position to recognise and help people with mental health problems improve their physical health in parallel with their mental health, in all clinical settings within and outwith the hospital, including inpatient care and primary health care settings . NHS England is confident that this new policy will help mental health nurses improve their skills, knowledge and competencies in the identification of those risk indicators that are known to adversely contribute to the physical health of people with mental health problems.

Robson and Gray (2007) have shown that the physical health of patients with mental health problems can be alleviated by improved monitoring and lifestyle choice interventions which can be implemented at the outset of treatment, giving mental health nurses the opportunity to make a valuable contribution to the improvement of both the physical and mental health of patients suffering from serious mental illness. Marder et al (2004) believe that all mental health care providers should undertake physical health monitoring as this will result in the earlier recognition of common, serious risk factors that may, if left undetected and treated, contribute to further physical impairment in patients with mental illness. A failure to address physical illness in people with mental health problems is the prime cause of the 20-year mortality gap for men, and 15 years for women, in people with mental health problems in western countries.(Thornicroft 2011)

**Key facts related to the physical health of patients with mental health problems**

This new policy highlights a number of worrying statistics pertinent to people suffering from mental illness:

* Mortality among mental health service users aged 19 and over in England was 3.6 times the rate of the general population in 2010/11.
* People in contact with specialist mental health services when compared with service users in the general population had a higher death rate for most causes of death, but in particular nearly four times the rate of deaths from diseases of the respiratory system, just over four times the rate of deaths from diseases of the digestive system, nearly three times the rate of deaths from diseases of the circulatory system
* Within these disease areas specific conditions that accounted for a high proportion of deaths among service users (under the age of 75) were diseases of the liver, and ischaemic heart diseases. Crucially the relative difference in mortality rates was largest among people aged 30 to 39: almost five times that of the general population.
* People with severe and enduring mental health problems have the lowest employment rate of all groups of people with a disability
* There were 198 deaths of people detained under the Mental Health Act in 2013/14, the majority of which were due to natural causes, including preventable physical ill health.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524571/Improving_physical_health_A.pdf>

**The vison of the policy “Improving the physical health of people with mental health problems: Actions for mental health nurses”**

The government is committed to addressing these physical health care inequalities among the mentally ill and is concentrating its efforts in eight key areas. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider all of these but the most important are:

* Support to help people stop smoking
* Tackling obesity
* Improving physical activity levels
* Reducing alcohol and substance use
* Sexual and reproductive health
* Medicine optimisation

**Smoking**

Smoking is endemic among the population of mental health patients and 40% of all tobacco is smoked by people living with mental health problems. I can vividly remember undertaking my mental health 12 week placement in the early 1970’s and being astonished to see the mental health nurses smoking with their patients in almost every therapeutic area of the psychiatric unit. Still today, smoking rates are as high as 64% in some mental health inpatient settings and 33% of people with mental health problems and more than 70% of patients being treated people in psychiatric units smoke tobacco. Hall and Prochaska (2009) indicate that cigarette smoking not only affects the quantity and quality of life for patients with mental illness but is itself a prediction of potential future suicidal behaviours and can reduce the therapeutic blood levels of some mental health medications. This new policy is emphasising the role of the mental health nurse in helping to support their patients in giving up smoking, not only to reduce the incidence of physical co morbidities but also because smoking cessation is known to have beneficial effects in improving mental well-being. The policy aspires to help psychiatric inpatient units to become smoke free by 2018.

**Obesity**

Obesity in England is spiralling out of control in huge swathes of the population and patients with mental health problems are not immune to being effected by the disease. Obesity itself can lead to other diseases, not least type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers. Obesity can have a negative impact on self-esteem and mental health and in this context a healthy diet has been shown to help reduce the risk of both physical and mental illness. It is important to stress that weight gain is not uncommon in people with mental health problems and some psychiatric medications have weight gain side effects. This new policy seeks to help mental health nurses introduce care interventions among their population of patients to address obesity through advice and support but also through dietary modifications.

**Improving physical activity levels**

This new policy shows that many mental health patients do not take enough physical exercise and it is known that physical exercise can improve physical and mental health. Clearly exercise has been a neglected intervention in mental health care and it has been shown to improve self-esteem and reduce stress and anxiety.(Callaghan 2004) .Mental health nurses are advised to include an appraisal of a person’s physical activity levels when undertaking a nursing assessment.

**Reducing alcohol and substance use**

This new policy shows that 30-50% of people with severe mental illness have problems with substance or alcohol misuse or both and that the prevalence of alcohol dependence among people with psychiatric disorders is almost twice as high as in the general population. Hence mental health nurses need to incorporate strategies to tackle alcohol and substance abuse as an integral component of their practice.

**Sexual and reproductive health**

People with mental illness are more likely to suffer sexually transmitted disease than

the general population, especially where substance misuse is also involved. The policy highlights that some mental health illnesses can affect sexual behaviour specifically if associated with drugs or alcohol. Mental health nurses are to be encouraged to engage patients in discussions around sexual health and to offer them screening as part of routine assessment.

**Medicine optimisation**

This policy document shows that compliance to medication among people with long term mental health disorders is poor and NHS England estimates that up to 8% of unplanned hospital admissions are attributable to medication issues. Furthermore some of the mental health medicines are known to have significant side effects affecting for example the cardiovascular system and optimum weight control. This resource for mental health nurses emphasises the role of high quality information given to patients to help them better understand their medications and the effects on their overall health.

**Conclusion**

This new policy and resource for mental health nurses also includes a range of physical health assessment tools to help nurses monitor the physical health of their patients. For example the Lester tool also known as the Positive Cardiometabolic Health Resource provides mental health nurses with a clinical resource that provides a simple framework for addressing cardiovascular and type 2 diabetes risks in patients with psychosis receiving antipsychotic medication

<http://mentalhealthpartnerships.com/resource/lester-uk-adaption/>

Clearly the physical health of patients with mental health problems has to be addressed more competently than is currently the case and this new policy resource will help mental health nurses in their quest to provide holistic care which embraces both mind and body.

**Key points**

* A new policy intended primarily as a resource for mental health nurses has been published which is intended to improving the physical health of people with mental health problems.
* The long-term consequences of mental illness are also reflected in deteriorating physical health, representing one of the greatest health inequalities in England.
* By 2020/21 at least 280,000 more people living with severe mental health problems will have their physical health needs identified and met, primarily through the greater utilization of the skills of mental health nurses.
* The government is committed to addressing physical health care inequalities among the mentally ill and is concentrating its efforts in a number of key areas including smoking cessation.

**References**

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