Healthwatch Mental Health Forum

The Healthwatch Croydon Forum, meeting quarterly, advises on our priorities & associated work programmes. The focus of this meeting was mental health, looking at the support residents require, the services they access, and how we, as a community, can raise awareness and maximise support.

Working in partnership with Healthwatch Lewisham, Southwark and Lambeth, the event was attended by mental health service users, and their carers, from the boroughs served by South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLaM).

At the table discussions, delegates raised issues around medication, service accessibility, information and advice, user involvement, awareness and carers. The following themes emerged:

Medication

It was commented that medication 'can have side effects that can worsen, not improve a person's wellbeing' and delegates considered whether clinicians were 'target bound' to prescribe medication, overlooking alternative approaches and talking therapies.' In one personal experience, a psychiatrist was persistent in offering medication that was not wanted, and implied 'discharge was conditional on acceptance'.

The Forum said:

Patients should be respected when reporting side effects, and alternative therapies considered should the patient clearly not want, or has concerns about medication offered. Is it appropriate for clinicians to 'pressure' patients, or make service aspects (such as discharge) conditional on acceptance of medication?

Service Accessibility

Most services are now promoting online services - this will save resources but can be 'extremely problematic' when trying to speak to someone. It was noted that referrals to Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) can take a long time and social worker allocation 'may take up to ten months'. It was noted that eligibility criteria for services is 'shifting to a crisis', rather than a preventative model.

The Forum said:

Getting 'a human response' is very important and automated systems should facilitate access to staff or volunteers. There needs to be 'better access' to talking therapies and social services in particular, with less waiting time. Would self-referral, or greater use of key workers, assist in expediting treatment and care? In terms of prevention, is there adequate focus and provision locally?

Information and Advice

Delegates said 'we need clear information on mental health services', including what is available, opening times, and what to do if you can't get access. It was felt there is too much 'clinical-speak' and residents need language they can understand.

The Forum said:

Services should use plain language wherever possible. Could we make better use of the voluntary sector to advertise and to signpost – they already hold a 'wide array of information'. A one-stop-shop for information would be welcome.

User Involvement

One person commented 'it's only when you have mental health issues, you realise what mental health is' and delegates felt that having a 'hidden condition' is harder because services may try to 'fit you into a medical model'. Mental health and learning disabilities are often ignored or overlooked, especially if clients have learned to mask their condition in order to cope, or fit in with society.

The Forum said:

We need more integrated working and information sharing between services, to achieve a holistic approach. Services need to be better at recognising and diagnosing mental health conditions, this means they need to listen to patients, families and carers.

Awareness

Some ethnic minority communities feel 'mental health is a western idea', and lack of understanding may deter people from accessing services. Men generally can be reluctant to seek help, with high rates of suicide in males up to 43 years of age.

The Forum said:

There is need to create awareness among communities - publicity in social venues such as churches and pubs would reach a wider section of society. People 'should be respected in their own needs' and this requires person centred approaches which recognise culture, age and gender.

Carers

'Care for the carers – who does?' It was felt that families and carers need more support, with better access to respite and carers assessments. Many carers 'don't want to discuss their own mental health needs', and the only time they come forward 'is with an issue'.

The Forum said:

The mental health and wellbeing of carers should not be overlooked. Carers should be encouraged and supported to get assessed, and access entitlements such as respite.

Our database contains emerging themes on mental health. In the afternoon session, we asked the following questions, framed in various sentiment, so see which resonated with the delegates. The trends may form the basis of future work on mental health.

Agree or Disagree?

"Doctors can be too quick to reach for the medication. What about alternatives?" *Agree*

"There is adequate funding for mental health services." *Disagree*

"I would like a greater choice of services. I feel like a square peg in a round hole sometimes." *Agree*

"I wasn't on the waiting list for too long." *Disagree*

"The impact of mental health on carers and family members is not fully recognised." *Agree*

"My condition was diagnosed very quickly." *Disagree*

"I got six sessions, but could really do with twice that…" *Neither agree or disagree*

"I am not too worried about the side effects of my medication." *Disagree*

"I find it easy to talk about my condition within the community." *Neither agree or disagree*

"Getting a referral was a hassle, to be honest!" *Agree*

"GPs are very knowledgeable about mental health." *Disagree*

"I find that services do work together and are joined-up." *Disagree*

"Getting through to someone on the phone can be difficult." *Agree*

"I know what to do in a crisis." *Neither agree or disagree*

"I have been given a good level of advice and information." *Disagree*

"I can usually get a GP appointment without difficulty." *Disagree*

"I have a named key worker." *Agree*

"Hidden conditions are much harder to treat than physical conditions." *Agree*

"I feel listened to." *Disagree*

Appendix 1 contains all comments posted by delegates during the day. We would like to thank Healthwatch Lewisham, Southwark and Lambeth for supporting the event, and all those who attended and assisted on the day.