

Careum Congress 2014

17./18.03.2014, Basel

«Machtfaktor Patient 3.0» – Patienten verändern das Gesicht des Gesundheitswesens

"The power of patients 3.0" – Patients are changing the face of health care

CAR14-74

Indicators of empowerment for mental health service users

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Teaser: Indicators of empowerment can be extremely useful when estimated how involved mental health service users actually are in influencing the services and practices. The current situation in Finland is scrutinized, focusing on the primary care services.

Background, objective: The National Plan for Mental Health and Substance Abuse (Mieli) aims to enhance the role of user expertise and peer support in mental health services in Finland. The plan focuses on ensuring the equality of access to services and the participation of user experts and peers in the service development. Increasing participation of this group provides valuable information about their own views; the kind of services that are working well and services that can be further developed to better match user needs. Strengthening participation requires equal partnerships between the service users and professionals, and knowledge about the empowering factors in health services. Increasing participation also requires innovative structures for development, models for action and indicators for follow-up. Here we take a look at the current situation in Finland, focusing on the primary care services.

Approach, methods, patient engagement: A partnership project of the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the European Commission on Empowerment seeks to define the concept of empowerment and suggests indicators for user and carer empowerment in mental health services. In a mental health context, empowerment refers to the level of choice, influence and control that users of mental health services can exercise over events in their lives. Indicators include protection of human rights; inclusion in decision-making; high-quality care and accountability of services and access to information and resources.

Findings: Empowerment and participation are emerging concepts in the mental health field and beginning to influence the practices. Many of the indicators are already employed in Finland. The National Plan for Mental Health and Substance Abuse (Mieli) aims to enhance the role of user expertise and peer support in mental health services in Finland.

Discussion and implications: Increasing participation of user experts and peers makes it possible to gain valuable information about the views of service users and their families; the kind of services that are working well and services that can be further developed to better match user needs. Empowerment of service users and their families is one of the main areas of mental health service development and policy making in the future. Reviewing and employing the indicators should be an essential part of the process.

Key terms: Empowerment, indicators, mental health