Snapshot Survey: Consumer and carer perceptions of the role of mental health nurses

September 2010

About the survey

• Purpose: To explore mental health consumer and carer perceptions of the mental health workforce including mental health nurses.

• Methodology: The online survey was conducted by the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses between 20 – 27 September 2010. Invitations were emailed to the College network, National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum contacts, and publicised on the College website.

• Response: 144 completed surveys (35.5% consumers, 64.5% carers).

Key findings

• People with mental health issues frequently have serious physical health problems as well, according to 94.9% of respondents, and 91.4% agreed that people with multiple health issues are rarely treated as a “whole person” in the health system.

• One in three consumers (36.7%) ranked a mental health nurse as the most important person in helping with their mental health out of all of their personal and professional support networks.

• More than half (53%) of the consumers and carers responding to the survey said that they have had trouble accessing mental health care for themselves, or for the person they care for, in the past two years.

• The government needs to invest more in building the mental health workforce to properly address Australia’s future mental health needs, according to 97.8% of respondents.

• The vast majority (95.7%) also agreed that there are not enough mental health professionals working in local communities to meet the growing demand or need.

Who to turn to?

• Eighty percent of consumers who answered the question about mental health nurses said that a mental health nurse had helped them in some way with their mental health.

• Family was the second most important support after mental health nurses, with 28.3% of consumers saying their family is the most important in helping with their mental health, followed by psychologist and psychiatrist in equal third place (each with 16%).
43.2% of carer respondents indicated family was most important in helping them as a mental health carer, followed by a mental health nurse (32.2%) and a psychiatrist (20.7%).

What mental health nurses do for consumers

More than two-thirds of those consumers surveyed (70.5%) said that a mental health nurse (or nurses) had made a significant difference to their life at a critical time, including by:

- listening to my story (62.7%)
- connecting with me (54%)
- giving me hope that there is recovery from mental illness (52.5%)
- supporting me to make changes in my life (50.8%)
- working collaboratively with me on my care plan (40.7%)
- advocating on my behalf (39%), and
- helping my family and friends understand my mental health issues (27.1%).

Consumer comments

- “The mental health nurse connected my experience with that of others so that I feel my responses to my illness and situation are 'normal', and understandable.”
- “The mental health nurse visited me at home when I was unwell, which was immensely important, especially to be able to see the interaction between myself and my partner.”
- “She challenges me to try to move out of my comfort zone. I feel that she cares about me and is always there.”

Looking out for carers

Carers indicated they value mental health nurses for:

- advocating on behalf of the person I care for (46.2%)
- working collaboratively with me as a carer (44.1%)
- helping me as a carer and other family and friends understand mental health issues (39.8%), and
- supporting me as a carer (33.3%).

Carer comments

- “Mental health nurses kept me in the loop regarding my daughter’s treatment and wellness.”
- “Many mental health nurses we have come in contact with over the years have been empathic, reassuring and understanding. They are an essential bridge between consumer, psychiatrist and carer.”
- “A mental health nurse can be the first person to offer hope and help when in a psychiatric ward. Their attitudes are of paramount importance.”