Revisiting Social Models of Mental Health Social Work

This article is a key points summary of evidence given to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Work on 9th December 2014. The APPG inquiry into mental health social work was called because of strong concerns among social workers mental health services, particularly social work.

The social perspective on mental health has a tradition going back many years. It is a perspective that locates an understanding of mental health within the social contexts within which people exist and uses practice and evidence to work with communities and individuals to help prevent mental health problems and to help with their recovery. The social model recognises other perspectives such as a biological one, but believes that prevention and recovery are best achieved in a holistic way. Social work has contributed greatly to the development of mental health services but in recent years its place and the social perspective has tended to become marginalised. This is to the detriment of people with mental health problems and the well-being of us all.

“If society opts for a wider social model, which social workers can do, it is cheaper and more effective.”
Alleyne Wilson, Chair, Board of Trustees, Social Perspectives Network

“If costs far more to deal with everything down the line. All the evidence says that early intervention works.”
Dr. Jerry Tew, Reader in Mental Health Social Work, Birmingham University

“Social work is in a good position to consider the whole person, rather than the dominant medical model, when it came to mental health social work; the physical, mental and social well-being of people. Social work looks at the person’s history, not just their behaviour and medication, and can help service users think beyond the medical model.
Currently, people’s experience of the system is very chaotic; if an individual is feeling their life and thoughts are chaotic it is harmful for people to enter that chaotic system. Relationship based work is an important role of social work, and social workers are well-placed to support people through a system.”

Sarah Carr
Co-Vice Chair, National Survivor User Network of National Survivor User Network (NSUN)
The meeting ended the following proposals that the APPG should further examine, via a Mental Health Inquiry, the following:

1. Organisational setting is less important than the model. After the next election the organisation of mental health services may be very different. There are very real threats with all the problems and potential changes but we have to make it an opportunity.

2. Service user co-production is powerful way of developing services and campaigning.

3. We do know what good integration is in mental health and this should be highlighted to other sectors.

4. To look at and get evidence of the positive impact of the social model and early intervention and give examples of good practice and things that might show value for money.

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1. The full transcript is available, with views and comments from the 21 people who gave evidence to the APPG available on request from england@basw.co.uk