

Linking physical and mental health care... it makes sense

FOR FAMILIES, CARERS AND FRIENDS



Families and carers of mental health consumers are essential members of the care team and can provide vital support to consumers to help them improve their physical health.

Why does it make sense to link physical and mental health care?

There is a substantial amount of research that tells us that physical health and mental health are critically linked. It makes sense then to also link physical and mental health care.

If you have a friend or family member that is a 'consumer' or user of a mental health service, you may have noticed that their physical health is not as good as it could be.

What you may not know is that they actually have a high risk of developing serious physical health issues, such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer and obesity. This is due to a variety of reasons, such as the consumer's lifestyle choices (eg smoking, alcohol intake, using drugs, etc) as well as having a poor diet and not getting enough exercise. Regular use of psychotropic medication for their mental illness can also have an impact on the physical health of consumers.

Taking a 'holistic' approach to the care of consumers, which means considering both their physical and mental health together, can make a big difference to their overall well-being, their quality of life and their ability to live longer.

For example, by identifying symptoms of a physical illness or disease and beginning treatment early, consumers have a much better chance of recovery, and in a shorter timeframe. Linking physical and mental health care will also enable side effects from medication to be recognised more easily and can reduce the number of consumers that are misdiagnosed with a mental illness when they actually have a physical illness.

What level of physical health care do mental health services need to provide to consumers?

People with a mental illness have the right to expect health care that's in line with the care provided to the general population.

Mental health services have an important responsibility to ensure that the consumers involved with their service have access to such health care by:

- Supporting consumers to receive a physical health examination
- Ruling out any physical causes for their mental illness or disorder
- Carefully considering how any treatment the consumer receives for their mental illness will affect their physical health, and vice versa
- Putting consumers in contact with a GP or other health providers for health reviews or tests
- Ensuring care plans for consumers address mental as well as physical health needs and any ongoing health issues
- Providing consumers with opportunities to improve their physical health, helping them to attend activities and giving them information that will improve their physical health and wellbeing

Area Mental Health Services in NSW now have a documented responsibility to ensure the consumers involved with their service receive physical as well as mental health care.

If my friend or family member is a mental health consumer, what can I do to help them improve their physical health?

As a carer, friend or family member of someone who uses a mental health service, you can make a real difference to their physical health by:

- Encouraging them to have a regular physical health examination
- Offering to make health appointments, and attending with them if they want this
- Helping them to get to and from health appointments
- Suggesting you keep a list of their health appointments and reminding them when they need to attend
- Making time to listen to them about their health issues and suggesting ways to address them
- Providing them with information about health and nutrition issues or healthy lifestyle choices (eg giving up smoking)
- Making changes to your own exercise and diet routine and encouraging them to join in

Carers and families can also try to support consumers to maintain their social networks, as isolation from others can have a negative affect on physical health.



The NSW Health Policy Directive PD2009_027 *Provision of Physical Health Care within Mental Health Services* provides clear direction regarding the actions mental health services must take so that consumers receive adequate physical health care. Information and advice to help mental health services meet their obligations is provided in the NSW Health *Physical Health Care for Mental Health Consumers Guidelines (GL2009_007)*.

Further information regarding the responsibilities of services in relation to physical health care is provided within the NSW Health brochure *Physical health care – what to expect from Your Mental Health Service*.

What role does the GP play in providing health care for consumers?

GPs have a vital role to play in helping consumers to improve their physical health.

As the GP is often the first person someone with a mental illness or disorder will contact for help, they have the opportunity to identify and treat physical health issues for consumers early.

If you are a carer of a mental health service consumer, GPs can also provide information and advice to you, if the consumer consents to this, regarding the consumer's physical health diagnosis and any treatment required. They can offer you practical advice about how you can help the consumer and how their physical health may be impacting on their mental health, and visa versa.

If you know the consumer has a regular GP, you should encourage the consumer to share the GP's contact information with their mental

health service so they can work together to help address any health concerns for the consumer.

If your friend or family member who is a consumer doesn't have a regular GP, you could offer to talk to the consumer's mental health service as they may be able to link the consumer with a local GP that has experience with, or an interest in, mental illness.

As a carer, what information will I be provided with about the consumer's health?

GPs and mental health services are bound by confidentiality requirements, which means that the confidentiality of the consumer's clinical records and personal information is protected. Mental health services have particular obligations to uphold this protection under the *Mental Health Act 2007* and the *Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002*.

However, the Mental Health Act 2007 also outlines the requirement for services to include carers by giving them greater access to information about the consumer while still allowing consumers to have some control regarding who is to be provided with information about them.

For further information about the *Mental Health Act 2007*, please visit the NSW Health website on www.health.nsw.gov.au.

In the first instance, you should talk to your friend or family member who is a consumer about what they might be comfortable to share with you about their physical health and how this would benefit them.

You should also talk to the mental health service that your friend or family member is involved with regarding what they feel you need to know and what consent is required from the consumer for this information to be shared.

Need more information?

- ✓ Speak to your local mental health service
- ✓ See your regular GP
- ✓ To view this information sheet and other resources, visit the ARAFMI NSW website <http://www.arafmi.org>