

Regional mental health services users understanding of the connection between physical health, mental health, and their wellbeing

BACKGROUND

People living with mental illness are at higher risk of developing physical illnesses, resulting in poorer quality of life and reduced life expectancy of up to 20 years. Physical health conditions significantly increase a person's risk of developing mental health conditions. The perspectives of Mental Health Professionals on physical and mental health are well documented, however research exploring the perspectives of people living with mental illness remains limited. This study aimed to explore regional NSW mental health service users' understanding of the connection between physical and mental health, and their wellbeing. Before interventions can be implemented to improve the health and wellbeing of people living with mental illness regionally, understanding their perspectives is crucial.

METHODS

This study used a descriptive qualitative study design which was underpinned by empowerment theory. Using empowerment theory to guide the semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity for data collection to be empowering for participants and have a therapeutic effect. Patients aged 18 and over who were accessing one of four Northern NSW Mental Health Inpatient Services as a voluntary patient were invited to participate in a 20-30 minute semi-structured interview in mid 2021. Quantitative demographic data was collected concurrently to support qualitative data. Six step thematic analysis was used to identify potential themes.

RESULTS

Fourteen participants admitted to regional mental health inpatient units aged between 25 and 84 years old were interviewed. Most participants (71%) self-reported their physical health to be only 'fair'. Participants who self-reported their mental health as 'good', 'fair' and 'poor' were evenly represented in interviews. Majority of participants (71%) self-reported their overall health and wellbeing as either 'good' or 'very good'. Qualitative data analysis revealed themes around the ability to function, feelings of control, having balance, self-concept and meeting basic needs. Interviews were described by participants as therapeutic and empowering, prompting participants to learn more about improving their physical and mental health through provided information or telephone-based coaching for support and motivation.

CONCLUSION

Connecting and disconnecting factors between physical health, mental health and wellbeing explained participants understanding of the connections. Participants emphasis of their need for meaning and purpose in life, good physical and mental health, is important for practice and health promoting intervention development. To improve holistic care, it is crucial that clinicians and patients work together to apply the theory of wellbeing to practice.

KEYWORDS

Mental health, physical health, wellbeing, patient perspectives, mental health service users, holistic care



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Cas is a Clinical Nurse Specialist in Mental Health at Tweed Hospital, Northern NSW Local Health District. As a 2020 RRCBP candidate she completed a descriptive qualitative study underpinned by empowerment theory. Cas hopes the findings of this study will contribute to improved holistic care with clinicians and patients working together to co-design an inpatient health and wellbeing program.

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