

PUBLIC POLICY

MENTALLY ILL NURSING HOME RESIDENTS: MENTAL HEALTH'S FORGOTTEN CONSTITUENCY

by Herbert P. Weiss, N.H.A.

The principal authors of a new report regarding mental health in nursing homes charge that cut-backs in Medicare and block granting of Medicaid will have a disproportionate and large impact on the funding of mental health treatments. The report, *Achieving Mental Health of Nursing Home Residents: Overcoming Barriers to Mental Health Care*, which this writer co-authored, calls mentally ill residents long-term care's "forgotten constituency."

According to Nancy Emerson Lombardo, the report's lead author, mental health experts worry that the situation for mentally impaired elders may worsen. If proposals are passed by the 104th Congress to cut Medicare, dismantle the Medicaid program and repeal essential features of the Nursing Home Reform Act, drastic results may occur. Reductions are coming at a time when more and more is being learned about the effectiveness of mental health treatments.

Achieving Mental Health... was published in August by the non-profit Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged's (HRCA) Research and Training Institute in Boston, in conjunction with the Mental Health Policy Resource Center (MHPRC) in Washington, DC. It is based on a 1993 invitational conference which brought together more than 130 experts in the field of mental health and aging.

The report enumerates on a variety of obstacles for appropriate mental health services. These include a shortage of mental health professionals trained in geriatrics and lack of in-service training in nursing homes to teach facility staff to treat behavior and functional consequences of mental illness or dementia. Inadequate Medicaid and Medicare payments and reimbursement rules do not reflect the relative costs of preferred treatments.

The report notes that, in spite of these hurdles, model mental health programs do exist in some nursing homes. They are funded by an array of federal and state agencies, nonprofit foundations or self-funded, drawing upon nonfederal funds. The issue brief recommends that such programs be identified, cost-benefits calculated and the results widely disseminated to nursing homes for replication.

Blueprint for Change

Key recommendations in the report include:

- additional funds for research, staff training, and consumer education initiatives
- improvement of Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement payments for psychiatrists who would train nursing home staff members in mental health services
- "unbundling," or separation, of mental health services from

nursing home per diem rates, so that funds intended for such assistance would not be buried in lump-sum reimbursement

- full implementation of all federal nursing home reform mandates passed in 1987 and 1989, such as required training for nursing home staff and strict limitation of psychotropic drugs and physical restraints with residents
- increased percentage of mental health services paid for by Medicare and other federal and private insurance to match payments for other medical services

Further, the report recommends that reimbursement incentives be redirected to recognize behavioral methods and de-emphasize "medication-only" treatment.

According to Lombardo, for most residents there are less costly ways to improve the mental health services other than to obtain psychiatric specialists. "The facility's in-service training budget could easily be used to bring in experts to teach staff how to care for residents with mental illness or behavioral problems," she said. This redirection of the facility's inservice training funds would allow outside specialists to serve as trainers and troubleshooters, not as consultants for individual residents.

The Massachusetts Experience

"Putting mental health funding on an equal footing with physical

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health is clearly an issue that must be addressed by the state Medicaid program and at the federal level," Daniel J. O'Leary, Executive Director of the Alzheimers Association of East Massachusetts, told *MGA Newsletter*. People with Alzheimers often get short-changed because they have a chronic degenerative illness which does not receive the same recognition as cancer, heart disease or AIDs, the MGA member said.

According to O'Leary, 60 percent of residents in skilled nursing homes suffer from some form of cognitive impairment. "Over 50,000 residents in over 500 skilled nursing homes would benefit if HRCA's report and its recommendations are accepted by state and federal officials," he predicted.

Although HRCA's report calls for the removal of barriers to mental health services in nursing homes, many facilities are not prepared and equipped to take care of violent residents, according to

Howard L. Braverman, President and CEO of the Jewish Nursing Home of Western Massachusetts, a 200 bed skilled nursing facility which operates a 40 bed Alzheimer's Specialty Care Unit (SCU). "Our facility was caught between the federal regulatory process, the rights of a resident with dementia and the rights of other residents in the SCU when we were faced with the decision whether to readmit an Alzheimers resident exhibiting violent episodes who had been transferred to a psychiatric hospital for observation."

State regulations require that an individual who has exceeded the allowable bed-hold time has a right to be readmitted to the next available bed. "This requirement put our facility in a tough balancing act of protecting the rights of a violent resident and the safety of other SCU residents and staff," Braverman stated.

Family members of SCU residents urged the facility not to readmit this violent individual to protect the safety of other. "When a person with behavior problems starts

to hit and choke other residents, family and friends do not want to ever see this person come back", he added.

According to Braverman, his facility had received a \$2,500 grant to establish a program modeled after Chase Memorial Nursing Home's Eden Alternative, a model program described in HRCA's report. Birds, cats, dogs, fish, and hanging gardens enhance the quality for life of residents in the facility located in New Berlin, N.Y. "Developing this kind of environment will help our patients deal with loneliness and boredom by creating a stimulating environment, he said.

For information about the report, *Achieving Mental Health of Nursing Home Residents: Overcoming Barriers to Mental Health Care*, call HRCA at (617) 325-8000, ext. 391.

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