Gender Sensitivity and Safety in Adult Acute Mental Health Inpatient Units
Women’s Safety

Introduction

In Adult Acute Inpatient Services, males and females share limited space while very unwell.

Creating and ensuring safety within these environments can present a range of challenges to all concerned.

As there are likely to be more males than female patients in acute wards, this raises the need for gender-sensitive responses by service providers to address safety issues and ensure that the privacy needs of women are protected. It is very important that all clients of mental health services receive appropriate treatment delivered within environments that are experienced as safe by consumers, their families, carers and staff.

The experience of safety is multidimensional. It encompasses physical, environmental and psychological determinants.

Background

The issues associated with gender sensitivity and safety in adult acute inpatient units are not new. In particular, two concerns raised in the literature included:

1) The lack of alternatives to psychiatric hospital admission when problems became overwhelming for women with dependent children, with the result that children had to be placed in care and

2) The risk of sexual harassment for hospitalized women from other patients and staff.

Professor Fiona Judd, Director of the Royal Women’s Hospital Centre for Women’s Mental Health has completed the literature review for the project. The Review searched the worldwide literature using MEDLINE and PSYCHLIT databases to locate policy and practice information on gender sensitive approaches to care and safety in adult acute inpatient units. Women’s experience of trauma was a recurring theme in the literature review.

Issues identified included include:

- The problems of abuse, trauma and violence experienced by many female consumers both in their life experiences and within mental health services.
- The lack of research regarding the frequency and perceptions of sexual assault and harassment of women on psychiatric wards. Those studies that have been conducted suggest that it is not uncommon.
- An issue identified through the review is that acute inpatient care, by definition, is disempowering for many women, especially those who have trauma histories. The ways in which services are provided to trauma survivors may unintentionally trigger feelings of powerlessness and cause the individual to feel retraumatized.

Background (cont.)

The literature supports that the creation of an atmosphere built on the need for safety, respect and acceptance, together with the goal of minimizing the possibilities for retraumatization are particularly salient when considering safety and gender sensitivity in acute inpatient units.

The review noted that clinicians increasingly advocate for the importance of identifying an individual’s trauma history; but the issue of single sex wards remain contentious within the literature.

While there is evidence of women’s perceived lack of safety on mixed sex wards, providing choice in care environments and ensuring women-only areas in mixed gender wards are critical. The literature review found that measures to optimize the safety of women in in-patient units are one aspect of gender sensitive care.

Comprehensive gender sensitive mental health service requires the planning, delivery, monitoring and quality improvement of mental health care to be informed by knowledge and understanding of gender differences in women and men, and their inter-relationship.

An estimated 50-80 per cent of women using psychiatric services have a history of sexual abuse/assault (Cox, M. 1994, Good practices in women’s mental health, Health Sharing Women’s Resource Service, Melbourne).

What we’re doing...

A Consumer and Carer participation Plan for 2008 has been developed in collaboration with our local Consumer and Carer Consultants incorporating such projects as:

- A Family friendly visiting room – which enhances privacy and safety
- A purpose built door to allow for gender specific bedrooms
- Women’s Listening Forums – to discuss perceptions of safety during Inpatient stays in collaboration with Women’s and Mental Health and The Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council

What else we’re doing...

Peninsula Health Psychiatric Service is planning to establish a Women’s Health Working Group to explore opportunities for change and improvement throughout the Organization.

Facilitation of a “Listening Forum” in consultation with the Victorian Women and Mental Health Network. These Listening Forums provide women with the opportunity to speak in a supportive environment about what contributed to feelings of safety or lack of safety during times they needed to be in hospital.

Planning for a Women’s Health Forum to celebrate International Women’s Day in March 2008 which would incorporate concepts as:

- Mental health
- Building resilience
- Sexual health
- Physical health
- Social Connectedness
- Relationships

“Women want services to respond to their needs within a system which offers them dignity, safety, control, practical assistance, quality care, choice and respect as individuals.”

What women want...

- Women want sensitivity to gender issues. Many have been sexually assaulted, and see their violent past experiences as central to their problems. Often they have difficulty talking to male medical staff about this issue.
- They want privacy and security.
- They want to be shown respect regardless of their state of mental health.
- They want holistic health care, including their physical problems as well as their mental issues.
- They hate telling their story over and over again. They need to be able to build a relationship and develop trust with clinicians, and this takes time. They want choices about their clinicians, and they want clinicians who are honest, direct and caring.

Women’s Health Services Mental Health Community Outreach Program