Achieving Human Rights in Mental Health, A Declaration for Change

Everyone has the right to be treated with dignity and respect and to receive fair treatment if they are ill or distressed.

However, for the one in four of us that will experience a mental health condition at some point in our lives, the inequality can be stark.

Today is Human Rights Day, a time to recognise the importance of rights in everyone’s day to day lives, whether this is the right to family life, education, employment or a good standard of physical and mental health.

Unfortunately people with mental health conditions are not getting proper access to care, are dying much younger, being denied opportunities in work and experiencing widespread discrimination.

In the last month we’ve seen how the rights of children and young people in Scotland are not being met, after it was revealed that 14 health boards in Scotland are failing to see child and adolescent patients in the Government’s 18 week waiting target.

Two weeks ago an NHS board was criticised for providing “inadequate” care, when a man with a history of suicide attempts took his own life after he was able to leave a secure hospital without staff realising.

Statistics from the Royal College of Psychiatrists show that on average people with mental health conditions die five to ten years younger than the general population. One reason for this can be discriminatory practice, with people’s physical health problems being ignored, as it is assumed it is linked to their mental health condition.

But it isn’t just in health care where people’s rights are not being met. A YouGov survey commissioned by See Me found that 45% of Scottish workers think people in their organisation wouldn’t speak about their mental health for fear of discrimination from
their colleagues, while 48% think someone in their work would be unlikely to disclose a mental health condition for fear of losing their job.

Although it is illegal to discriminate against someone in work because of their mental health, unfortunately, we know this happens.

The most recent Scottish Social Attitudes Survey found that the number of people who think that those with mental health problems should have the same human rights as anyone else is dropping, from 88% in 2002, to 82% last year.

This is a big problem, as one volunteer who worked with See Me after experiencing Post Traumatic Stress, said: “I was going through the most terrifying period of my life and people thought it was my fault.”

However we are changing this culture and making Scotland a leader in promoting equality and allowing everyone the opportunity to live a fulfilled life.

In June 2015 a group of Scottish mental health and human rights organisations came together to organise a landmark two-day national event on human rights and mental health recovery, Rights for Life.

During the event hundreds of people with lived experience of mental health conditions looked at all aspects of human rights and discussed the reality of whether or not these are met for people experiencing mental health conditions.

Since then the Scottish Recovery Network, See Me and Voices of eXperience (VOX) have been working together with other partners to bring together all the contributions from these two days to create a Declaration of Rights and a Change Agenda.

These documents are intended to achieve real and lasting change to the lives of people affected by mental health conditions.

The Declaration sets out the rights that people affected by mental health problems in Scotland are calling for. The Change Agenda sets out some of the ways in which these rights can be realised.

These are not new ideas, but a strengthening of the rights set out in international human rights treaties to which the UK are already signed up.
And we are supported in this by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Human Rights Commission as they progress human rights through the ‘fly the flag for human rights’ campaign and through their ongoing support for the Rights for Life agenda and the organisations leading it.

Mental health affects us all. On this Human Rights Day, have your say on the documents at rightsforlife.org, and be part of a change which improves all our lives.

Simon Bradstreet, Scottish Recovery Network
Judith Robertson, See Me
Gordon Johnston, VOX

ENDS...

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NOTES TO EDITORS

1. See Me is Scotland's National programme to end mental health stigma and discrimination, enabling people who experience mental health problems to live fulfilled lives.

2. The Scottish Recovery Network (SRN) is a non-profit organisation working to achieve ‘A Scotland where mental health recovery is a reality for all’. We know people can and do recover from even the most serious mental health problems. We want to see more:
   - Knowledge and understanding of recovery
   - Empowerment for people affected by mental health problems
   - Recovery focused policy and practice

3. Voices of eXperience is a National Mental Health Service User Led organisation, we work in partnership with mental health and related services to ensure that service users get every opportunity to contribute positively to changes in the services that serve them and wider society.