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Re-integrating Healthcare Professionals with User Experience into Mental Healthcare Delivery. Danish example.

Ladies and gentlemen. I am honoured to be here and having the possibility to tell you about one of the most interesting projects my department has been involved in: Transforming mental disability into job ability.

Introduction

Usually having a job plays a central role in our life. It gives us an income, status, an identity and enables us to describe ourselves in relation to other people. After having introduced ourselves by our name, we are often asked: "What job do you have?" A job is important for most of us, but especially for mentally vulnerable people.

According to the WHO, mental health is one of the biggest challenges facing the EU. Next to cardio-vascular disorders, mental illness is the second largest health expense in the EU. In many countries, mental health problems account for about 40% of all absences from work due to illness.

It is estimated that mental illness will affect approx. 20% of all Danes at some point in their lives. For most of them, this is a life-altering experience that often affects their work and social life as well as family and friends negatively. Very often many of them fail to regain their place in the labour market and are therefore at risk of social exclusion.

From a socio-economic point of view this is costly and adds to the pressure on the public sector and the social security system.

Background

Inspired by experiences in the United States and England and especially encouraged by dr Rachel Perkins from London - a service user herself - we started what we thought was a brave experimental project in Aarhus, Denmark employing service users in Psychiatric Services as staff members. Later on the project was extended to 6 counties in Denmark and also to the Faroe Islands.

The new idea in our project - and the reason why we look upon it as our own and as a successful one - is that we added something very important - training. It might be easy to find a job for a service user - but difficult to get him/her to stay there. To be able to do that the service users need training.

The MB project

The project is called the MB-project from the Danish words for service user employees and tries to enable service users to get back into psychiatric services as staff members with the help of the MB training, their earlier formal training and their service user background to make a change in the psychiatry and to act as role models and give hope to other service users.

The idea of the project

Some of the general points about employing people with mental health problems are:

- it gives meaning and purpose in life
- affords status and identity in society
- links people to the communities in which they live and enables them to be valued for the

- contribution that they make
- provides friends and social contacts
- provides the resources people need to do the other things they value in life.

But why employ people with mental health problems in mental health services?

- the sector provides much needed employment opportunities
- the employment sets an example for other employers
- improves the quality of the mental health service provided
- enables clients to benefit from the "expertise of experience"
- provides a role model for clients and others
- helps to break down the destructive "them" and "us" divide within services.

They can put themselves in the place of the client and they can be attentive and empathetic towards the clients in a way that nobody else can because they "have been there" themselves. They can act as advocates for the clients by reminding the staff over and over again about the views of the clients.

In relation to the other staff members, they can bring new skills and knowledge into the multidisciplinary work and they can show that in spite of mental illness it is possible to manage and get a good life. In this way they can challenge the prejudices and wrong conceptions that are often unconsciously to be found among the staff. They can give the staff hope in relation to the difficulties of the clients.

Inclusion

The training program was advertised in the newspaper and all applicants were interviewed about their situation and possibilities. It is also important not to take somebody on board where we can see that the program could be one more failure.

Statistics for 2007 show that more than 80% of the MBs in Aarhus were diagnosed with depression while in the whole country the figure was about 65% .

About 80 % of the MB's have a relevant educational background as nurses, social education workers, care workers, occupational therapists and psychologists.

A project consisting of two equal parts - or perhaps three parts

A. Training

B. Practice

C. Support

A. Training

All user employees must attend a special training program. The level of that training has from the start been quite high, because as mentioned about 80 % of the MBs have a relevant educational background. It is important that the program is not too intensive. Therefore it consists of short modules, usually 1/2 days and only 3 days/week .

Today the training consists of 300 hours spread over one year and 20 weeks of practise. The training is planned in such a way that experience from the work place is incorporated with training in basic knowledge about various conditions necessary when working within the psychiatric and social psychiatric services. Among the subjects are basic knowledge about psychiatry and social work. The subjects include:

Confidentiality, communication, the newest knowledge about psychiatric illnesses, self-supporting work, restraint in psychiatry, medication, action plans, life forms, social rights, professional boundaries in work with users, role conflicts, negative/positive experience with revealing of own background, conflict management, writing ability and documentation via case work and recovery/psychosocial rehabilitation in a Danish context.

B. Practise

We were happy to establish 12 jobs the first year through negotiations with institutions in our social psychiatric system and that was only the beginning. There have of course been some obstacles in getting service users accepted as staff members but the answer to that has been clear information from the very beginning about their abilities and weaknesses and much support from the project to both workplaces and the service user employees. After that the idea of employing service users has been accepted and there have been established about 200 jobs all over the country. Most of the services users work between 15 and 20 hours/week.

C. Support

It is extremely important that the support given by the project group works and that it works from the very beginning, and not only at the beginning. It has shown that the support must be an ongoing process. That means:

- support in the recruitment process
- support in the transition to work
- support through a training program
- ongoing support in employment
- ongoing support at work

Financing

A detail, but a most important detail of a project like this which we cannot forget is money. We applied for money for the project - a lot of money - and the authorities making the grant must have thought that the idea really was good, because we actually got much more money than we had dreamed of. The money came in the first stage from the Ministry of Social Affairs and the municipality in Aarhus. When the Ministry of Social Affairs after some years did not want to finance our project any more I had to find a new solution. Where could we get money? It was about health, social life but then I thought that it was also about employment. Ok. From where should the money come then? The answer was: The Ministry of Labour. We succeeded and got the Ministry interested in our project and that meant that we now could go on for three more years, but now a much broader scale. We extended the project to 6 counties in Denmark and also to the Faroe Islands.

Today the municipalities are responsible for the employment situation in the country and The Ministry of Labour did not want to support us any longer. What should we do then? We could not just let our brilliant idea die. It **did not** because we contacted the Official Education system at the University Colleges and asked them to cooperate with us. They agreed and we started a new life. Our training program was accepted because we already had projects, examinations with external examiner and so on, because we had found that the "user students" were much more capable than we thought in the beginning. The result was that our service users now could take parts of the official program and go to examinations at the University Colleges and if they passed that examination they could get international ECTS points. If they did not want that, they could just take part in the program without getting diplomas.

But what influence did that have on the economy. Earlier the training was free due to our external funding. Now the students had to pay for it. Would they do that? No, very few could, but now the

municipalities, who were responsible for the employment system would pay those training periods because they could see that they in the long end saved a lot of money because instead of paying pensions and social benefits to the unemployed service users, those people could now start working again, perhaps mostly part time but they were able to return to work again.

The impact of this program is much bigger though -not only getting service users back to work and that is perhaps the most important thing to remember. Every year since 2002 when the first service user students finished their training we arrange a speech day for the service users and perhaps much more important - they are asked to invite their families and friends to this party. I always have difficulties giving my speech at this occasion because I always become so moved by seeing for instance young boys that perhaps for the first time in their life can be proud of their ill mother or father - seeing them going up to get their diploma and flowers and applauds for finishing their training program. Or old parents seeing their daughter or son passing an examination which again gives them the possibility to apply for a real job .

You can imagine the moving atmosphere in the room. Proud and happy people. The program is in reality effecting perhaps 10 time as many as the students themselves. What this means in order to get rid of stigmatization is perhaps the most important perspective for the future.

I am also glad to tell you that those MB´s from my department have established an association with web page and so on where they can support each other and have chat meetings.

The situation today

Today in Denmark more than 200 service users have been able to get employment after the training and of them about 100 in Aarhus. In 2007 we sent a questionnaire to the 90 people in Aarhus, who at that time had gone through the training program, and the result was very positive indeed. 75% of the MB students had got jobs in psychiatric services and 25% outside the psychiatry.

In 2009 The Danish Psychosocial Rehabilitation Information Centre by Jens Hjort Andersen evaluated the MB participants situation today. Of those who answered the questionnaire 75% still had a job 2-3 years after they had finished their training. Although it was not possible to reach a bit more than half of them it gives a picture of the impact of the project. The Centre was especially interested in the wellbeing of the participants and the study shows that the practice and the training have been of utmost importance for them and especially the training has given them a feeling of being able to contribute with something to the benefit of the users. They also mention a much better coping ability which also has improved during the period after finishing the training.

Why am I telling you this.

I am doing it because I think that it is extraordinarily important to remember that a program such as the MB project has a background, a history, but my point is: It should also have a future. All of us have an obligation to be inspired and inspire others to take advantage of new knowledge and ideas, and use this knowledge and experience to do something more perhaps just something on a very small scale, slightly changed, or completely changed and improved - but something for the benefit of users all over the world.

Thank you for your attention.

