



Mental illness stigma lingers: Diseases of the mind deserve same treatment as diseases of the body

Saturday, August 21, 2004

Clinical depression is an illness, like heart disease, diabetes or cancer. And like those diseases, it's treatable. Unfortunately, the stigma attached to mental illness and to those who have it, coupled with the cost of care, often stands in the way of proper treatment.

The recent revelation by Kent County District Court Judge Steven Servaas that he has struggled secretly with depression for 20 years is a powerful reminder that mental illness affects people in all walks of life. His story also shows that treatment is vital to keeping mental ailments under control. The judge attempted suicide earlier this summer -- an act he attributed to an interaction of pain drugs for a recent injury and those he takes to control his depression. He is back on the bench in Rockford after a two month medical leave.

Unlike Judge Servaas, millions of people with mental health issues don't have the resources to get the treatment they need. A 1999 U.S. Surgeon General report found that 50 million Americans a year struggle with mental illness, but fewer than half seek treatment. A key reason is cost.

Getting mentally sick is not covered by most health insurance in the same way as getting physically sick. Many insurance plans charge higher co-pays, deductibles and premiums for mental health care and impose stricter limits on psychiatric visits and stays at mental health hospitals -- limits that don't apply to doctor's visits or hospital stays for physical ailments.

Mental health parity has been debated for years. President Bush's support for expanded insurance coverage for the mentally ill put the issue up front two years ago. He has personal experience with diseases of the mind -- his mother, Barbara, has struggled with painful bouts of depression. Mr. Bush, however, has not pushed federal legislation requiring parity for employers with more than 50 workers. A mental-health parity bill, proposed by Sens. Peter Domenici, R-N.M., and the late Paul Wellstone, D-Minn., has been floating around Congress for two years.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, such legislation would have minimal effect on insurance premiums -- a less than 1 percent increase. Private companies in America would pay an estimated \$4.6 billion annually for such a parity requirement. That's a hefty sum, but not when measured against the price of untreated mental illness -- \$70 billion a year in lost productivity and absenteeism, according to the American Psychiatric Association. Mental illness is the second leading cause of disability and premature death.

Those are reasons why approximately 33 states and some employers already embrace mental health parity or elements of it in their insurance plans. Even so, misinformation and ignorance about mental illness often creates shame and embarrassment among those who have it. That causes many to secretly struggle with their mental demons alone, often unbeknownst to family, friends or co-workers.

While heart attacks, cancer and other physical ailments are easy for most people to comprehend, illnesses of the mind, such as schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder and the behaviors these conditions cause, can be difficult to grasp. That difficulty can perpetuate unfounded fears and attitudes about mental illness.

Good mental health is just as important as good physical health. Repairing broken minds ought to be treated the same as repairing broken arms and legs. Judge Servaas has put a public face on mental illness for this community. His story might help others with similar ailments find the help and hope they need to lead happy and productive lives.

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