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User survey highlights peer support issues

'Have you been given information by NHS mental health services about getting support from people who have experience of the same mental health needs as you?'

This is one of the new questions in the national NHS Community Mental Health Service User Survey. This is about people having been given information about peer support. This information being available in a range of ways, for example, having a discussion about it, accessible leaflets etc.

Better still is peer support being a routine element of a person's care, support and treatment. But what is getting in the way of embedding peer support in practice?

- Access to peer support workers in mental health teams. How do we ensure this is equitable? A referral system to peer support workers within a team can highlight some interesting things. Peer support workers report that some care co-ordinators refer for peer support work and others don't.

- Could it be said that most people have some lived experience of mental health issues, through their own life experiences? If so, then people are routinely being supported by peer support workers. Mission accomplished, box ticked. But this is not quite right – this is hitting the target but missing the point. It diminishes the experiences of people with mental health issues.

- Should recruitment to all posts actively encourage people with lived experience? Perhaps this is already happening but what about the person's choice? Should people have to disclose their lived experience – and if they don't, will they be discriminated against at selection?

- Peer support on social media? There is ever-growing peer support on social media channels. People regularly blog, tweet and share stories on Facebook about what is going on for them and it is reciprocal. Such support bypasses the 'referral' stage and is instant.

- The influence of national surveys in changing practice. The national survey question creates a standard and a measure. The danger is of it providing a minimum standard, and I would not want to see the current provision of actual peer support eroded due to a standard of providing information only.

People currently accessing mental health services are future peer support workers – the eco-system of peer support. People supporting others through sharing what they have learned along the way while achieving their own goals and ambitions.

To foster an equitable landscape there should be a balance between expert by experience and expert by education. **MHN**

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