

Major Conditions Strategy Submissions: mental ill health June 2023

Question: How can we better support those with mental ill health?

We are concerned that mental health will be diluted in a strategy focussing on other physical conditions. Mental health has historically lacked attention. There is a need to ensure that mental health has the same parity of focus, funding, and workforce investment as physical health conditions.

Investment in the full multidisciplinary team in mental health is needed urgently. This must include skilled allied health professionals, including speech and language therapists, as part of the core mental health workforce. Speech and language therapists support people in community services, in low and medium secure hospitals and forensic settings.

Having access to the right workforce with the right skills at the right time is key to improving the lives of all people living with mental ill health and their families. Speech and language therapists should be embedded in all acute and community mental health teams.

Communication and mental health are closely interlinked. Chronic or acute mental ill health can impair a person's communication. Changes in communication can sometimes be a symptom of mental ill health. Speech, language or communication needs may be secondary to a mental health diagnosis, for example, dementia, depression, psychosis or schizophrenia.

Mental health services need to focus more on communication and understanding. Whilst learning disability and autism services focus on communication accessible information and understanding underpinning informed choice, capacity and control, mental health services lack this focus.

Ongoing access to allied health professional intervention, such as speech and language therapy, is critical as people's symptoms fluctuate or change, to enable them to live well and remain in work, education or remain socially active.

Mental health services need to be more therapeutic approach, moving away from a medical model and being led by allied health professional services who support and enable recovery and rehabilitation.

Every person has a right to have access to vital and life saving speech and language therapy for their communication and swallowing needs, as well as having their physical needs met. Speech and language therapy in the NHS is not a “nice to have”. People need to access and receive speech and language therapy appropriate to their condition that is not allocated via a post-code lottery.

The wider workforce needs training on the links between communication needs and mental health. All staff need training to help them to better support the needs of people with communication difficulties accessing mental health services. Through the training, staff would gain the skills and confidence to engage with people with communication difficulties much more effectively.

Unsupported communication difficulties are a barrier to accessing and engaging in rehabilitation and psychological programmes, which are often delivered verbally and are thus reliant on people's language skills. Failure to follow and benefit from a programme impacts upon recovery and length of stay in mental health settings.

We hope that the Major Conditions Strategy will commit to communication accessible information, to enable people to make healthy informed choices. If information and communication is inaccessible people cannot follow the advice because they do not understand what is being said and what they are meant to do.

Every mental health service needs to commit change through implementing the 5 Good Communication Standards:

<https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Project/RCSLT/good-comm-standards.pdf>.

Also see the RCSLT's response to the 2022 call for evidence for the 10 year plan to improve mental health.

<https://www.rcslt.org/news/rcslt-responds-to-evidence-call-for-10-year-plan-to-improve-mental-health/>