

HEALTH AND SOCIAL WELLBEING: DISABILITY & MENTAL HEALTH

Issue/Problem	The mental health and emotional wellbeing of people with disabilities
Evidence Base (Equality & Inequalities Report)	<p>Disabled people are more likely to experience a lot, or a great deal, of worry than those who are not disabled.</p> <p>Key survey findings in a report by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland highlight whilst 34% of those who were not disabled had experienced quite a lot or a great deal of stress in the last 12 months prior to the survey, the percentage rose to 52% for disabled people. Experiences of depression within the last 12 months were higher among women who were disabled (44%) than men (34%).</p> <p><i>Ref: Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2003) cited in “Equality and Inequalities in Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland: A Statistical Overview (DHSSPS, 2004:126).</i></p>
Evidence Base (Literature Review)	<p>People with disabilities (e.g. physical impairments such as cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injury etc) are just as likely as the general population to experience mental health problems. They may be even more likely than the general population to need and use mental health services. Possible reasons for this may include – higher rates of poverty and unemployed amongst disabled people which are themselves associated with poor mental health; the greater risks of abuse experienced by disabled children and adults; and, some people with mental health support needs may be more likely to become physically disabled as a result of accidents or attempted suicide¹. There is also increasing acknowledgement that long-term mental health problems are correlated with conditions such as heart disease and diabetes².</p> <p>It is suggested that people with physical impairments and mental health support needs tend to be overlooked by policy-makers and commissioners of services. Many people with disabilities report having difficulty accessing mental health services because of their physical impairments. Many also have difficulty accessing physical disability services because of the inadequate recognition of mental health needs with disability related services³.</p>

Inequalities and Unfair Access Issues Emerging from the DHSSPS (2004) “Equality and Inequalities in Health and Social Care: A Statistical Overview” Report

Chronic medical conditions and physical and sensory disability can increase vulnerability to poor mental or emotional health. Sensory loss and the greater likelihood of illness and disability make older people especially vulnerable to mental health problems⁴.

Both hospital and community mental health services are covered under the Disability Discrimination Act (i.e. service providers must make reasonable adjustments to policies, practices and procedures to ensure service accessibility for disabled service users). However, many disabled people continue to report difficulty in accessing such services including – no recognition of their needs in relation to their physical impairment, negative attitudes to disability held by some staff, lack of person assistance or appropriate equipment, and physical inaccessible buildings and facilities⁵.

Medication given for mental health needs can have a negative impact upon a persons’ disability, alternatively, medication relating to a physical impairment can have a negative impact upon mental health. Greater co-ordination between GPs, psychiatrists in regards to the prescribing of medication for mental health needs and physical impairments is needed⁶.

Is the issue/problem being addressed by current or proposed strategies and policies? On what level?

The mental health of people with learning disabilities has been recognised by the Northern Ireland [Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability](#). The Equal Lives Report on Learning Disability sets a number of objectives for improving mental health services for people with a learning disability. Objective 7, for example, sets out to secure improvements in both the mental and physical health of people with a learning disability through developing access to high quality health services. Objective 11 aims to encourage staff in other settings to develop their understanding and awareness of learning disability issues.

In regards to lack of knowledge of disability and mental illness, Action 17 of the [Promoting Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan 2003-2008](#) states that the DHSSPS in partnership with HSS Boards and professional and voluntary bodies will carry out a review of professional training to ensure that the promotion of mental health and emotional wellbeing takes into account the particular needs of disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities. The Strategy and Action plan also acknowledges that chronic medical conditions and physical and sensory disability can increase vulnerability to poor mental or emotional health. It further highlights that physical disability can have a negative impact upon the mental health of parents and siblings and others who provide a caring role.

Is the problem amenable to further intervention by the DHSSPS or other?

Morris (2004) through a study of services for people with physical impairments and mental health support needs identifies a range of key interventions which require implementation:

- Mental health services should recognise that a proportion of their services users have physical impairments. Ensuring access to services and compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act should be monitored across all mental health services.
- A focus must be given to address the needs of people with physical impairments in acute psychiatric services including attention to the treatment of physical conditions and symptoms (especially pain) while someone is on a psychiatric ward.
- Talking treatments and other mental health services such as crisis and residential services must be made accessible to people with disabilities.
- There is a need to review procedures for the prescribing of medication for people with physical impairments who also have mental health support needs. Those prescribing in a primary care, specialist or acute service should be aware of the possible effect on physical impairments of medication prescribed for mental illness, and vice versa.
- Frontline physical disability services (e.g. social work, day centres, care management teams etc) need to work closely with mental health services in order to meet the needs of those with a disability who have mental health support needs).

McConkey et al (2004)⁷ in an audit of research in learning disabilities commissioned by the DHSSPS as part of the independent review in Mental Health and Learning Disability, identifies a range of interventions necessary to address the needs of people with a learning disability and mental health problems:

- Adequate training for staff to allow them to identify mental health problems in clients with learning disabilities who display challenging behaviour and/or mental health problems.
- Service commissioners, providers and agencies must take action to target the negative impact of challenging behaviour or mental health problems on the person with a learning disability and others (e.g. families, carers, siblings). Such targeting needs to be proactive and preventative where possible rather than reactive.
- Proactive interventions could include specialised programmes for developing emotional literacy, educational, social recreational and occupational competencies.
- There should be a strong interdisciplinary approach to addressing the needs of people with a learning disability who display challenging behaviour/mental health problems. This should include exploring links with psychiatric services.
- Equal access to a wide range of services within the individual's

Inequalities and Unfair Access Issues Emerging from the DHSSPS (2004) “Equality and Inequalities in Health and Social Care: A Statistical Overview” Report

community should be a guiding principle. These include early screening; a comprehensive assessment, treatment and short and long-term support within the person’s own home environment and/or alternative settings (i.e. day centre, school), the provision of respite care and the option of a placement within a community-based specialist treatment unit.

The Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability [“Equal Lives”](#) Report makes a number of recommendations regarding the mental health of people with learning disabilities:

- That by December 2009 the majority of referrals of people with high levels of adaptive functioning/mild learning disability should access, with support from dedicated learning disability services if required, mainstream mental health services and hospital admission.
- Community based assessment and treatment services should be developed to provide assessment and treatment of people with a learning disability who have specific mental health needs and/or challenging behaviours.
- Some people with a learning disability are at increased risk of recurrent severe and challenging behaviours and/or mental illness. Health and Social Care Trusts should ensure that protocols are agreed so that a proactive approach can be taken to systematic intervention should there be signs of recurrence.

¹ Morris, J. (2004a) *“One town for my body, another for my mind”*: Services for people with physical impairments and mental health support needs. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

² Mentality (2003) cited in Morris, J. (2004) *“One town for my body, another for my mind”*: Services for people with physical impairments and mental health support needs. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

³ Morris, J. (2004b) *People with physical impairments and mental health support needs: a critical review of the literature*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

⁴ DHSSPS (2003) *Promoting Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan 2003-2008*. http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/publications/2003/promoting_mental_health.pdf

⁵ Morris, J. (2004a). *Op cit*.

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ McConkey, R., Slevin, I., Barr, O., Taggart, L. & Sowney, M. (2004) *Audit of Learning Disability in Northern Ireland*. http://www.science.ulster.ac.uk/inr/developmental/audit/audit_of_learning_disability_research_in_northern_ireland.pdf