

Justice Health Update

Long Bay Hospital setback

The Justice Health Consumer and Community Group (CCC) meet bi-monthly. MHCC attends meetings to represent the issues for both inmates experiencing mental health problems and forensic patients. MHCC have long advocated for consumer representation within the forensic system, since we do not believe that the complaints mechanisms in place such as: official visitors, the health complaints commission or the ombudsman are appropriately situated to fulfill the complex needs of this client group. Consumer representation would do much to assist patients in presenting complaints in the most constructive format, addressed to the appropriate authority.

MHCC have been led to believe that positions are to be established when Long Bay Hospital at Malabar commences service. However, we have recently been informed that numerous issues regarding maintenance provider contracts have delayed progress, and that contracts are likely to take considerable time being ratified by Treasury. The outcome is that Stage 1 is likely to be postponed until 2008. MHCC is highlighting the issue with Justice Health, particularly since the hospital opening is now substantially delayed. There is need to find an interim measure to fulfil the principles outlined in The National Mental Health Strategy Plan: 2003 – 2008, and the National Statement of Principles for Forensic Mental Health, supporting the premise that forensic patients are entitled to expect that the system affords them identical rights to those of mainstream mental health consumers. We will keep you posted...

MHCC paper highlights service gaps

MHCC presented a paper at the Community Restorative Centre (CRC) AGM in November, and at the Consumer Advisory Group (CAG) Conference "Forging our Future, 3" in December 2005. The subject of the paper was *"Mental Illness in the Community: Why people with mental illness are over-represented in the Criminal Justice System."* The central focus was to provide an understanding of the extent to which mental illness is present in the general population, to emphasise the connection with the criminal justice system and why substance abuse together with socio-economic and environmental factors compound, often leading to interactions with the criminal justice system. In NSW, people with a mental illness frequently encounter the criminal justice system as a result of an inability to access mental health services, either through absence of, or barriers to services, rather than because of inherent criminality.

The presentation was of particular interest to CRC and its members who work with prisoners and their families delivering accommodation and transition services, family casework, court support, community information and education. They are intensely aware of the myriad of mental health and substance abuse issues and socio-economic deprivation that impact on mental health wellbeing. Nevertheless, participants reported that some of the evidence made available to them during the presentation brought the issues into sharper focus.

The paper is available on the MHCC website www.mhcc.org.au

New Forum for Criminal Justice

MHCC is establishing a Mental Health and Criminal Justice Forum. The first meeting is to be held in February. Members of the group will include NGOs and government organisations including Justice Health and Juvenile Justice. It is envisaged that the group will initially work towards identifying the principal activities of the group, to be developed into a Terms of Reference. The activities for particular focus are likely to include: joint submissions; consultations; working parties and other strategies to improve services for patients with mental health disorders or who are experiencing problems within correctional settings, diversional and post-release programs. MHCC, currently a member of the Justice Health Consumer and Community Group (CCC) see this as an opportunity to present detailed findings to the CCC and to position themselves as an expert consultative group on mental health issues and service delivery to Justice Health.

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