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Physical health monitoring in mental health settings

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There is increasing awareness through research that people with mental illness disproportionately experience and die early from physical health conditions. People suffering from serious mental illness (SMI) such as schizophrenia or bipolar affective disorder have increased rates of physical health conditions, dyslipidemia, obesity and cardiovascular conditions than the general population. They also have higher than average rates of non-insulin-dependent diabetes, infectious diseases and certain types of cancer. This is due to several dynamics such as illicit drug abuse, unhealthy diets, lack of exercise, unequal access to healthcare and side effects of medication. Even with increased uptake of health services, people with serious mental illness do not always get the support they require promptly and are likely to have their physical health needs ignored or attributed to their mental diagnoses (diagnostic overshadowing). Other barriers to effective physical care provision could be related to staffs' lack of knowledge and skills relating to physical health conditions and interventions, poor staff attitudes and stigmatization of people with a mental illness is also a likely factor. Mental health nurses are best placed as front line workers to offer screening, monitoring and interventions; however, their experiences, knowledge and educational needs regarding physical health conditions, physical care amongst people suffering with serious mental illness are not studied often.

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