

Update to the Community
Immediate Jeopardy: Safety and Treatment Concerns
At the Milwaukee County Mental Health Complex Acute Care Unit

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January, 2010, the state and federal government conducted an investigation of the Milwaukee County Mental Health Complex (MHC) Acute Care Unit, resulting in "Immediate Jeopardy" status and possible loss of federal Medicare funding. The investigators concluded that there was inappropriate sexual contact between a number of patients (some patients had reported that they were sexually assaulted); failure to notify guardians of these incidents; failure to monitor patients with a history of sexual aggression; and inadequate primary health care. The Milwaukee County Behavioral Health Division (BHD) developed and implemented a Corrective Action Plan and follow-up surveyors found that the deficiencies were corrected.

To some observers it may appear that the problems are solved. That is certainly not the case. The incidents that led to the investigation were only symptoms of much broader and deeper problems at MHC. Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW), the designated protection and advocacy agency for people with mental illness and other disabilities in Wisconsin, has begun a more expansive analysis of the overall situation in MHC, with the goal of developing recommendations to permanently ensure the safety of all current and future MHC patients, and to create an inpatient environment where positive and effective treatment is provided in an individualized manner.

This analysis will take a substantial amount of time. In fact, DRW staff are still waiting to receive some of the records we have requested and will need to complete our analysis. However, given the importance of the concerns, we felt a responsibility to provide an "Update to the Community," in part to let decision-makers and the general public know that MHC is not "fixed" yet, and in part to communicate an initial set of concerns and recommendations. The 2011 county budget process and the Adult Mental Health Redesign Initiative are both underway, and we urge that our recommendations be considered in both of those arenas. Our final report will elaborate on our initial concerns and recommendations, and will delve into other areas that we have only begun to analyze.

Our Major Concerns

- Failure to keep patients safe (especially patients with an increased vulnerability to sexual aggression).
- Lack of patient-centered care: exclusion of families, inadequate treatment for sexual aggression and substance abuse, overuse of restraints, failure to adequately meet the needs of patients with both a cognitive disability and mental illness, and lack of trauma informed care.

- Failure to provide adequate discharge planning that connects patients with community services and supports.
- Lack of viable options for patients and families to report concerns.
- Inadequate monitoring by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services and lack of appropriate accreditation, in contrast with Wisconsin's other large psychiatric hospitals.

Summary of Recommendations

- Implement a series of educational and protective approaches to increase safety, reduce vulnerability of patients, and ensure that patients and families are aware of their options for making complaints.
- Take steps to make the care at MHC more patient-centered, to improve discharge planning, and to strengthen connections to community services and supports.
- Form a Community Advisory Council to provide local oversight of the Acute Unit.
- Re-evaluate the allocation of Milwaukee County's scarce mental health resources; specifically consider whether underfunding community mental health services is resulting in an expensive over-reliance on inpatient services.
- Increase family/guardian involvement in admission, discharge and the treatment process.
- Reduce the use of restraints and seclusion.
- Accelerate the timeline for securing accreditation.
- Increase state oversight.

Conclusion

Our full report will not be ready for a while. But this update clearly shows the direction we are recommending for the future of the MHC. It will take a lot of work to make the Acute Unit a safe and positive treatment environment. This is also a good time for all of us to take stock of how Milwaukee County is using its resources for mental health services—are mental health consumers and the public getting the best return on the taxpayers' investment? We welcome the opportunity to start the dialogue now with county and state officials to consider these questions and plan for the future.

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