

Mental Health Care Service Users: active participants in their own recovery

MICHELLE DE GOEDE, Director of Comcare

Mental health care service users must become active participants in the treatment and management of their mental health. The more we are involved in our own health, the more likely our health will be restored. We need to engage our minds in getting well.

Often, as persons living with mental illness, we might pretend mental illness does not exist and that we should just follow doctor's orders. But we should not leave our treatment to someone else.

We should establish what treatment works for us and what does not, read up about our illness, and question the medication prescribed. We need to remember that not even our doctors can describe our illness as well as we can.

Each person's experience is different. Mental illness impacts on life and the treatment can be harsh. There is absolutely nothing to be ashamed of if you are living with a mental illness. If we are ever to recover from the dark shadow of mental illness, which is the stigma, we must lose our shame. We must learn to be honest with the people around us and be upfront about our illness. We must find someone to talk to.

Mental health care users should not be passive partners in their treatment, but should take an active responsibility where their mental health is concerned. In order to become activists in mental health, we must all join in, not underplay or deny mental illness, but recover together. Then we will be able to make progress. The pathway to recovery is determined by having a good night's sleep and being up and dressed every morning, ready for the day ahead.

Persons living with mental illness are protected by the law. Chapter 3 of the South African Mental Health Care Act (SAMHCA) of 2002 deals with rights. The five core rights are: 1). The right to



◆ Michelle de Goede, guest speaker at Fountain House.

respect, dignity and privacy. 2). The right to consent to care, treatment and rehabilitation. 3). The right to expect fair treatment. 4). The right not to be exploited. 5). The right to legal representation.

Regulations of the SAMHCA regarding the admission, long-term hospitalisation and administration of psychiatric patients have been reviewed. Patients receiving ongoing care must be assessed after 6 months to ensure they are not 'dumped' at hospital. Longer-term patients are often treatment resistant, particularly if an illness has been brought on by long-term substance abuse.

Persons living with mental health have access to legal aid. The Western Cape has one centralised Mental Health Review Board (MHRB) that is registered with the Law Society of South Africa. It serves as a referee in cases of patient complaints and appeals, such as in the case of involuntary hospital admission. A patient might ask: "Why must I pay for something that I don't need or want?" And there is accountability to the law. An involuntary admission involves a High Court Application, and a judge must rule on all cases.

To access help from the MHRB, call them on 021 370 1220/1. For legal aid call 021 426 4126. Browse their website: www.legal-aid.co.za

We must change the status quo of mental health in SA

OSCAR JANUARY AND MICHAEL HATTINGH

WE HAVE RECENTLY ASKED: where are we with regards to making the progress we need to make mental health a priority in South Africa? We have heard of many initiatives, but in our opinion there are too few. Certainly the greatest adversary to the mental health care service user is the devastating stigma associated with mental illness.

The stigmatisation of mental illness and the use of inappropriate terminology degrades the mental health care service user and prevents progress. We hear words like 'malletjie', 'schizo' and 'retard', being used in our communities every day. The great task facing us must be to move away from this and educate our communities to properly understand exactly what mental illness is, and the functions of recovery systems such as psychiatric hospitals and mental health support groups.

It is a common belief that once a person becomes mentally ill and has been hospitalised, their future is destined to be an unending nightmare. Most people do not know that nowadays a person



◆ Mental Health Care Service User active in Cape Town.

living with a mental illness has a good chance of recovery if the healing steps are made available and can resume life with little or no interruption.

But the burden of mental illness in this country is increasing and the stigma surrounding mental illness hampers the gathering of accurate national statistics of persons living with mental illness. The increase in the use of street drugs has resulted in a great number of young adults experiencing psychotic breakdown and being hospitalised for a brief period - provided they don't slip into a more permanent condition and need long-term, or chronic, treatment.



◆ Michael Hattingh and Oscar January.

For everyone living with a mental illness there are the associated problems: the shortage of beds at state psychiatric hospitals, the unavailability of new and affordable medication, and the shortage of suitable accommodation and drop-in centres such as Fountain House, which provide psycho-social rehabilitation and should be available in all communities. And, of course, there is the problem of lack of access to employment. Perhaps when reliable statistical evidence is gathered, the parties concerned will constructively engage in a national effort to make mental health care services a priority for all who need them in South Africa.

As an advocacy movement, The Cape Consumer Advocacy Body participates in efforts both locally and nationally to raise awareness about mental health. We believe a good starting point to improve the situation is the empowerment of the mental health care service user. For example, CCAB's 'Learning About Mental Health Literacy' workshop explains terminology found in the South African Mental Health Care Act of 2002. The mental health care service user requires knowledge and understanding to assist in recognising, preventing and managing mental disorders. However, should the mental health care service user not be empowered, mental health problems in this country will increase and poor service delivery for persons living with mental illness, as well as the associated stigma, will continue to be the status quo.

The slogan of the South African Federation for Mental Health is 'Mental Health is the Nation's Wealth.' We believe that CCAB's efforts will go a long way to increase the overall good mental health of this country. On our way there, we should do our very best to advocate for one another, and in doing so, for ourselves. Service users need to be resilient and motivated in promoting our nation's wealth. Remember, the way forward is together. Nothing About Us Without Us.

The Genomics of Schizophrenia in South African Xhosa People Project

DR MEGAN CAMPBELL (PhD)

SCHIZOPHRENIA IS ESTIMATED TO AFFECT 24 MILLION people worldwide. The illness is characterised by a range of thought, behaviour and emotional difficulties that have a significant impact on the work and social functioning of those affected. While the causes of schizophrenia are not well understood, genetic and environmental factors appear to play an important role.

Genetics is a popular topic in global health research. Each cell within our bodies contains DNA. We inherit this DNA from our parents, and it is responsible for certain characteristics such as why some people are taller or shorter, or have blue eyes or brown. Genes may also play an important role in putting one person at higher risk for developing illnesses like diabetes or schizophrenia. The National Institute of Health (NIH) in the United States is investing considerable funding into genetics research. They hope that this research will provide more information into the causes of illnesses like diabetes and schizophrenia. This information may lead to new and improved treatments.

One of the studies currently being funded by the NIH is a South African study into the genetics of schizophrenia. This study is taking place in the Western and Eastern Cape, focusing on the Xhosa



◆ The Community Advisory Body (CAB).

people. Engaging local community representatives who represent the interests of Xhosa people being recruited for this study, has been an important focus. A Community Advisory Board (CAB) has been appointed to help researchers look at sensitive and respectful ways of engaging with the Xhosa community about this research. The CAB has made a valuable contribution towards important issues like respecting the traditional cultural beliefs of the community, improving informed consent materials and raising important issues about stigmatisation of people with schizophrenia.

If you would like to know more about the study, please contact our project manager, Dr Adam Baldinger on 021 404 5481 or email baldinger@gmail.com

Our future must be to live with equality in our country

MANDLA KONZA



I RECEIVE LOVELY SUPPORT from my family, who have accepted my illness.

When I started taking medication I used to sleep during the day. My family did not say I was lazy, but supported me. I have to say thanks to them that I have a goal in life.

I attend the Rainbow Foundation Support Group in Kraaifontein where we meet at the local library weekly. Popular activities are: an exercise session, creative work and discussing health issues.

My concern, as group leader, is the Xhosa speakers who feel unwelcome at the group because they don't understand English. They feel ashamed and do not attend. We have to find a way to make this right.

I have met some amazing people at CCAB, all of whom show dignity and respect for one another. We discuss ways to improve our support groups and, of course, our disability rights: access to affordable and up-to-date medication, food and accommodation, job opportunities and education (including psycho-social rehabilitation).

As mental health care service users, we must remember that we have the right to follow up on our diagnosis and treatment should we be unhappy. Let's thrive and live with equality and without discrimination in our country.

Unifying structures & laws, art makes a counterpoint

ALEX SMITH



I HAVE BEEN SPENDING TIME in my studio. Feeling happy, creative and motivated, I have been experimenting with new

media, including acrylic, Gauche and pastel.

Abstract “Uptrike”, painted in 2015, measures 60cm x 40cm and the medium is acrylic on board. The purpose of abstract painting is to unify structures and laws, even breaking with tradition, and design must break free.

In dealing with the human condition, which has both the creative and destructive, artists have to ask questions, such as the impact of today’s mass consumer culture on the appreciation of visual art. My art is psychological. I expose personal angst and give a unique statement. In response to emotional distress, painting provides a very practical way of throwing a visual tantrum, and the abstraction is enjoyed when the mental principles behind the work are understood. I am trying to find mental liberation in the context of making art.



◆ Uptrike, 2015.

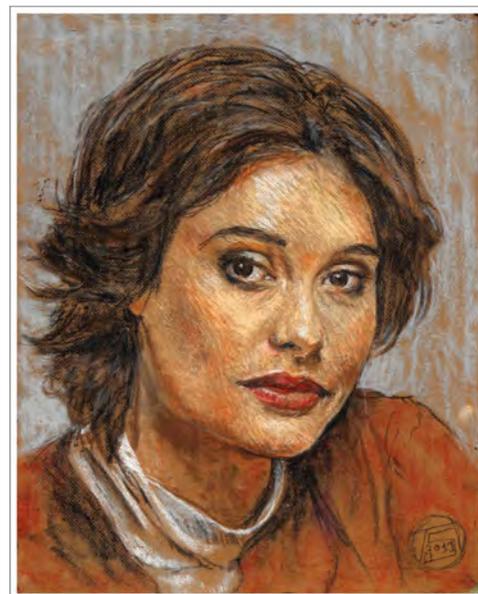
Today we navigate through media. It becomes a list of details, a flood of information, and we don’t pause to analyse the images we see. But portraiture can break through this, precisely because the portrait is observed as standing still, or static, for some time.

“Model from a Magazine”, was created in 2011; it measures 34.5cm x 44cm, and the medium is chalk pastel on board.

The eyes are exotic, those of a beautiful woman, and the title might suggest an admission of guilt. By recycling the media, art makes a counterpoint to crass images

that are exploited—here is a beautiful face from an ugly environment.

Is there a universal desire to see oneself depicted in iconic status, not necessarily religious, but elevated nonetheless from the banality of life?



◆ Model from a Magazine, 2011.

I have been studying the drawings of the artist Leonardo da Vinci for the past few years. He shows an economical style, using a few strokes to represent the very form of the model. He makes use of the realistic style and does not subvert the character of the person. The artist exists to depict the person to an extent where they become special and have unique personality and natural beauty.

I am launching my website this year. This will show my portfolio, business plan, market position, and a niche where I can be found. My design services include all manner of business-related designs, including logos, business cards, letterheads, corporate identity, website design, graphic signature, print advertising and flyers. My fine art work includes portraits, abstract painting, landscapes and flowers in a variety of media including, acrylic, watercolour, Gauche, pastel, pencil and pen and ink.

My contact details are: 074 431 0258 or write to me at ciaspycatcher@gmail.com

Edited & photographs by Michael Hattingh. **CCAB meets at 11:00 on the 2nd Friday of every month at Fountain House, 233 Lwr Main Road, Observatory - 021 447 7409.**

