SANE

FACTSHEET

PEOPLE LIVING WITH MENTAL ILL–HEALTH DESERVE OUR SUPPORT NOT OUR JUDGMENT

The recent Medibank data breach has exposed a lot more than just personal information, it's shone an uncomfortable spotlight on how mental illness is perceived in our society.

Working for the national organisation representing Australians living with complex mental health needs, and someone with a lived experience of poor mental health myself, I was horrified to see that those with a history of mental health and substance use were put on a 'naughty' list.

This is an extreme of something called mental health stigma - the negative reactions or discrimination experienced by those living with mental ill-health. It affects individuals living with mental illness or mental distress and often their family and carers as well

Despite considerable advances in awareness and understanding of mental illness, these stigmatising attitudes are still highly prevalent in Australia.

While it's become socially acceptable (and even celebrated) to share personal experiences of mild to moderate anxiety or depression, this is not the case for Australians living with complex or long term mental health needs.

In our current society, it takes a brave person indeed to openly admit to living with a psychotic, personality or eating disorder and the Medibank situation has reinforced that very clearly.

Whilst we've made some positive steps forward, there are still significant systemic challenges to overcome and stigma – the social taboo that says it's not ok to have a significant mental illness – is still firmly in place.

Over the last decade, and especially in the recent COVID years, we've seen government place focus on mental health and wellbeing. We've had action plans national plans developed, new legislation and new agencies established to prioritise mental health funding and policy development. We've even had a national survey completed to capture much needed data on the prevalence of mental illnesses.

But very little of this activity has touched the estimated 800,000 Australians living with complex mental health needs and their families and carers.

Australians living with complex mental health needs still face significant barriers to accessing support, housing and employment. They are treated differently when it comes to insurance, family law and the justice system.

Sometimes, they're even denied mental health care. Individuals and families are being excluded from health and community services because they are deemed too 'complex' to be adequately supported within current resourcing levels. This is especially common amongst those experiencing substance use disorders, and alarmingly, chronic suicidality.

Their existence wasn't even captured in that national survey, as it only collected information on 'common' disorders.

At SANE, we hear this story every day. We have thousands of Australians accessing our online services for support and advice, because it's not provided anywhere else. According to recent data, 40 percent of those using SANE online support services report having either no access to qualified mental health professionals or only a GP as their sole treating health professional.

So where do we go from here?

At SANE, we'll continue our 36 year legacy of taking action on stigma - challenging and improving media coverage thru StigmaWatch, engaging with employers via our peer ambassadors and bridging the gaps in the health system through our services. We'll continue to build and offer our community-funded programs and services that improve quality of life and provide at least some of the social support that this community so desperately needs.

The recent release of a draft national strategy to tackle both public and structural stigma and discrimination is a good step forward, and we're waiting to see what change comes from this.

But until we actively rally against stigma, and speak up about things like being publicly referred to as being placed on a 'naughty' list, Australians like myself will continue to face harmful discrimination and exclusion. It's time for this to change.

Rachel Green

CEO, SANE Australia

If anything in this article has caused distress, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Beyond Blue on 1300 22 3636. Those needing support for complex mental health needs can access SANE services at sane.org/support