Stigma Kills

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Introduction:

Stigma against people with mental illnesses is oppressive and alienating; it prevents many from seeking help, denying them access to the support networks and treatment they need to recover. Diagnostic overshadowing occurs when symptoms of physical illness are attributed to the service user's mental illness. This increases the risks of treatment delay and the development of complications. The situation may arise due to stigmatisation of the mental condition and negative attitudes among healthcare practitioners.

Objectives: To review the literature on 'diagnostic overshadowing" in mentally ill patients.

Methods: A literature review was made by searching for articles in PubMED.

Results: 'Diagnostic overshadowing' appears to be common in general health care settings. Studies have shown that people with mental illness die earlier compared to the general population. Suicide is a big factor, accounting for 30 to 40 percent of early deaths. But 60 percent die of preventable or treatable conditions. Studies showed that patients with both a mental illness and a cardiovascular condition received about half the number of follow-up interventions, like bypass surgery or cardiac catheterization, after having a heart attack than did the 'normal" cardiac patients.

Conclusions: Diagnostic overshadowing remains a hurdle in delivering high quality psychiatric and medical healthcare to our patients. It is believed that diagnostic overshadowing contributes to the excess medical morbidity and mortality seen in individuals with psychiatric disorders.