Mental Health

BMA Scotland

The British Medical Association is a politically neutral registered trade union and professional association representing doctors from all branches of medicine. The BMA has a total membership of over 168,000 which continues to grow each year. In Scotland, the BMA represents over 16,000 members.

Introduction

The BMA has a long history of lobbying for improved mental health services. In recent years we have called particularly for recognition of the need for parity of esteem between mental and physical health and we were pleased to see Scotland’s political parties recognised the importance of this in their manifestos ahead of this year’s Scottish general election in May.

The appointment of a dedicated Minister for Mental Health, a first in the UK, is a clear signal from the government that mental health is a priority. The Scottish Government is also consulting on a new Mental Health Strategy for the next ten years so this is a critical time to tackle some of the issues facing mental health services in Scotland.

We know that 1 in 3 GP appointments are for mental health and wellbeing issues. And 1 in 4 people will have some kind of mental health problem in the course of their life.\(^1\)

With an ageing population there has been an increase in the number of people with dementia and this is expected to continue rising as people live longer. And as the stigma of having a mental illness decreases more people are willing to identify when they have an issue and come forward to access services.

Latest figures from ISD show the number of antidepressants prescribed in Scotland continues to rise with 6,115,737 items prescribed in 2015/16 costing £44.08 million. The amount of under-21s taking prescribed anti-depressants has almost doubled in recent years to nearly 24,000 last year. This includes 1,123 children under 15 who were given antidepressant prescriptions to deal with mental health issues, up from 560 in 2009.

The more deprived an area you live in the higher the incidence of mental illness, and many mental health problems begin early in life therefore it is particularly important to invest adequately in children and young people’s mental health. Tackling problems early on can stop them from getting worse. The BMA believes prevention and early intervention and the promotion of mental wellness and resilience is key to addressing mental health.

Funding and staffing

In order to support the delivery of effective mental health services, adequate resources in terms of funding and well-trained mental health professionals must be in place. The BMA is concerned that with a growing demand for mental health services there is appropriate investment and capacity to provide adequate support and treatment for patients that is timely and consistent across Scotland.

The Scottish Government has already committed an additional £150m for mental health services over the next five years. Whilst this funding is welcome, doctors and

\(^1\) http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/treatmentswellbeing/talkingtoyourgp.aspx
the wider public will want to know how that money will be used to tackle issues including:

- long waiting times to access services and mental health support
- a lack of appropriate acute beds for mental health patients
- testing and evaluating new models of care to determine what is most effective
- delivering an integrated approach across primary and secondary care
- ensuring services are efficient, effective and safe
- full staffing of mental health services, including sufficient numbers of psychiatrists to fill the many vacancies across Scotland
- a holistic approach that considers, physical, mental and social determinants when assessing treatment options

There is currently an issue with access to services, particularly psychological therapies and child and adolescent mental health services, where waiting times are often too long, so improvements are overdue. Ensuring there is adequate staff to deliver such services is crucial – and psychiatry consistently has one of the highest vacancy rates in the consultant workforce.

Unfilled trainee posts are a further source of pressure on the health service often leaving services struggling to cope with gaps in healthcare teams.

For example, this year only 68% of GP trainee vacancies were filled. Mental health specialties have faced particular problems in filling trainee vacancies for a number of years, with a fill rate of just 69% this year for round one of speciality training recruitment².

Fulfilling the aims of a new mental health strategy will be a challenge without significant action to improve recruitment and retention and making posts more attractive — in both primary and secondary care.

BMA Scotland believes more funding focussed on mental health services is needed, an aim to reduce waiting times and improve treatment by ensuring patients are seen before problems escalate and become more complex and education and awareness raising of the issues around mental health and wellbeing particularly in schools.

Mental health has historically been under-resourced, under-funded and under-staffed and as such it is crucial that the government takes steps to improve funding and appropriate recruitment into mental health work.

Doctors in most specialties are often the interface between the public and mental health services and for that reason it is imperative that they are supported with effective training and have the necessary skills and knowledge required to treat patients with mental health issues.

**Barriers to accessing children’s mental health services**

Statistics for the first quarter of 2016, published by ISD Scotland, show 84.2% of people referred for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services were seen within 18 weeks - up from 76.1% in the previous quarter, but still a failure to meet the needs of these particularly vulnerable patients. The number of clinical staff working in psychological therapies has increased by 1.1% on last year with 1,079.2 WTE posts across Scotland. We know there is a geographical variance in accessing services too and this can be further affected where there are gaps in the medical workforce.

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² NHS Education Scotland.
It is important that there is transparency around how the latest announcement on an additional £150 million to improve mental health services will be spent, particularly in relation to improving access to CAMHS.

The Scottish Government has previously committed to improve CAMHS with increased funding dedicated to these services. But it is important that we see the detail of how that money is being used to benefit improved access to services, a reduction in waiting times and in developing the CAMHS workforce.3

Conclusion

Mental health cannot be viewed in isolation as often it goes hand in hand with physical health problems, public health challenges including alcohol, obesity, smoking, drugs misuse, and access to education, housing issues and employment.

Priority should be given to ensuring a range of evidence-based services are available close to home, to suit different needs alongside a fluid patient journey from first appointment and assessment to accessing services and recovery.

Rapid access to medical and non-medical treatments for common, serious mental illnesses that are well resourced and evidenced-based will be crucial to the success of long-term plans to address mental health.

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3 The Scottish Government (2015) Scotland’s spending plans and draft budget