NSQHS Standards user guide for health services providing care for people with mental health issues

Introduction

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) welcomes this opportunity to provide feedback to the National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards user guide for health services providing care for people with mental health issues. The RACP is a diverse organisation responsible for training, educating and representing over 24,500 medical specialists and trainee specialists in Australia and New Zealand.

Overall, the RACP supports the content of the user guide but we have identified several areas for improvement, accompanied by recommendations on how to address these. These are described below.

Summary of feedback

1. Data collection

There are two important areas of data collection that health services should be expected to be proactively monitoring but which are not currently mentioned in the guide:

1.1 Persons triaged away from the health service or excluded from services
Where people are triaged away from local mental health services by the Referral and Access Team of their local health networks or districts because their specific diagnostic conditions are currently not the subject of funding criteria, there is still value in collecting data on these people. This could assist in reducing significant (possibly unrecognised) gaps in local mental health service planning and therefore contributing to improved service provision for people with mental health needs.

We therefore propose that the user guide could include a section on a recommendation that mental health services monitor the numbers and diagnoses and periodically sample and review the clinical outcomes of those who are refused care because their diagnostic conditions do not meet current funding criteria. This is because the sample of people who are refused care are likely to be representative of an unmet (unfunded) need for their diagnoses or problems. We believe this is valuable primary health service planning data that is currently being overlooked, and directly relates to safety and quality.

1.2 Service outcome data
The RACP recommends the addition of a section on health services requirements to collect data on specific outcomes such as treatment and service effectiveness. At present the user guide includes requirements of health services to collect information on patient satisfaction and to identify patients at risk, such as those at risk of suicide, but there is also a need to mention and discuss more specific outcome measurements of effectiveness.

2. Addressing specific identifiable population groups

There are specific groups that the RACP recommends be addressed directly in the user guide in the interests of improving service safety and quality:

2.1 Children of persons who have mental health conditions
The user guide, in the interests of comprehensive service provision, should refer to the need to consider the well-being of the children of people who are experiencing mental health issues. This consideration should extend from the period leading up to an intervention, during health service provision and post intervention.

Currently, these children and their special needs and vulnerabilities are not mentioned in the document, except in a reference to another document (see section 5 of the user guide).

2.2 Maternal mental health
The World Health Organisation has reinforced the importance of addressing the mental health needs of pregnant women, women who have just given birth and impact unaddressed needs can have on the child. There is currently no reference to maternal mental health in the user guide so we recommend this should be addressed.

2.3 Indigenous mental health
Given the acknowledged serious mental and physical health inequalities within the Indigenous population, the RACP recommends this important guide give more prominence to addressing Indigenous mental health. For example, this could be done by adding a dedicated section on Indigenous mental health.

2.4 Adults with intellectual disability and including autism.
There is virtually no mention of adults with intellectual disability and those with autism. This is an identifiable and significant vulnerable population group. The prevalence of mental illness among adults with intellectual disability is higher than peers without intellectual disability, and even more problematic is the use of antipsychotics in up to 60% of the population. Evidence based Australian and international literature on mental health issues among adults with intellectual disability should be used as a basis for a specific section in the guide on mental health for this group.

2.5 Other significant groups: the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), refugee and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender (LGBT) populations
These are vulnerable population groups with proportionally high rates of mental illness that may require health services to be appreciative of contextual factors. Although the above population groups are mentioned in the guide, the RACP notes this may be often in the context of other documents or else the sections do not deal with these matters in sufficient depth as a guide for health services. As groups with a recognised need for mental health services, the RACP recommends the guide could include a section addressing how health services may need to respond and adapt approaches to better meet the service needs of people within these population groups. In this respect, we feel the guide should go beyond broad sentences like “staff should be educated about these issues…” (section 1).

3. Other gaps in the guide

3.1 Staff safety and health service responses to violence in hospital wards
All hospitals must have robust “code blacks” for staff to activate as a response to conditions of patient violence. The RACP recommends highlighting a zero, not minimal, tolerance of physical violence against staff. The current standards document does not focus enough on staff safety in such distressing situations in psychiatric, medical or surgical wards where there are patients with acute mental health issues.

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1 See for example, http://www.who.int/mental_health/maternal-child/maternal_mental_health/en/ accessed 2 July 2018
3.2 Guide for wider services to better address the needs of patients with mental health illness
The guide could also include a list of “reasonable adjustments” so that other generic services are able to cater better to the needs of patients with mental illness, for example in hospitals, including when patients are not in special psychiatric wards.

The RACP trusts this feedback is helpful in finalising a comprehensive user guide for health services providing care for people with mental health issues.