Caring for People With Severe Mental Disorders: A National Plan to Improve Services—Editors’ Introduction

In 1989 the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) involved 78 of the world’s leading research scientists, advocates, service providers, administrators, consumers, and their family members in addressing one of our Nation’s most pervasive and neglected public health problems. Three panels were formed to investigate needs and make recommendations concerning a broad spectrum of research areas and support: clinical services, service systems, and research resources. The Panels were asked to develop a comprehensive strategy that would assist NIMH in applying state-of-the-art research to improve services and ultimately the quality of life for the millions of citizens and their families who suffer from the devastating effects of severe, persistent, and disabling mental disorders. These people suffer from schizophrenia, major depressive disorders, and other less prevalent but no less destructive forms of mental illness.

The Clinical Services Research Panel recommended research priorities to improve the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of clinical services provided in community and other health care settings to the severely mentally ill population. The Panel also addressed two related questions: How can research lead to better understanding and alleviation of the devastating personal consequences of severe mental disorder for the individual? How can research improve understanding of the implications of severe mental illness for the family and society?

The Service Systems Research Panel examined how research can be used to improve the organization and financing of mental health services for people with severe mental illness. Another major concern was to determine ways in which research can help reduce the additional problems that people with severe mental illness and their families so often face in their efforts to secure adequate care, housing, income, and social support.

The Research Resources Panel devoted its attention to identifying the resources needed to implement the recommendations of the Clinical Services Research and Service Systems Research Panels. The Panel found an urgent need to reinforce the national effort in mental health services research by making a larger investment in this field, training more and better qualified investigators, and developing stronger interfaces between the research and practice communities on the one hand, and systems of care and consumer and family groups on the other.

The major findings and recommendations of the three Panels are summarized in Caring for People with Severe Mental Disorders: A National Plan of Research to Improve Services (National Institute of Mental Health 1991). The comprehensive Panel reports (Attkisson et al. 1992, this issue; Steinwachs et al. 1992, this issue; Mechanic et al. 1992, this issue) provide a more extensive view of the scientific basis of the National Plan as well as more detailed recommendations for research in the future.

We are deeply grateful to all those who participated in the development of the National Plan and the supporting Panel reports. The task that lies ahead is to ensure that the Panel recommendations are implemented and lead to lasting improvements in how we as a nation care for people with severe mental disorders.

References

Attkisson, C.; Cook, J.; Karno, M.; Lehman, A.; McGlashan, T.H.;
Acknowledgments

This issue of the Schizophrenia Bulletin contains the full report of three panels of experts who were convened at the request of Dr. Lewis L. Judd, the former National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) Director. The three panels deliberated from May 1989 through 1990. Work of the panels was aided by Dr. Jack D. Burke, Jr., former Director, Division of Applied and Services Research and by Dr. Ira D. Glick, the former Senior Science Advisor to NIMH from 1988 to 1990. Mr. Dennis Jones provided support and advice while serving as liaison to the National Advisory Mental Health Council. Several current and former NIMH staff members also contributed to the report including Neal Brown, Sheila Burgard, Kimberly Burke, and Dr. Agnes Rupp.