Lessons Learned

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I feel privileged to write a commentary for Mr Jepson’s First Person Account. As a psychiatrist in the US Navy Reserve, I offer my support to the service men and women who protect our country. In my civilian job at the Veterans Health Administration, I try and do the same for our Military Veterans.

I was struck by Mr Jepson’s observation that he is fighting for his recovery. In the military, after a battle is over, an “after-action report” is often generated. The report identifies problems and proposes ways to avoid those problems in the future; leading to “lessons learned” for others to reference. This First Person Account is an excellent example of an “after action report” for schizophrenia. Mr Jepson has identified past problems: stopping his medication when he feels better, for example. He also proposes ways to avoid potential problems in the future such as avoiding alcohol. His story provides us with “lessons learned” about the illness, so we can pass them on to other people with schizophrenia, clinicians, and family members.

Mr Jepson mentions the helpfulness of health professionals at McGuire— a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Hospital in the southern United States—in guiding him to a support system. The VA has embraced the concept of recovery. All 15 of the major mental illness research groups within the VA have made recovery a priority in their work. Each VA Medical Center has a recovery coordinator to assist patients, family, and staff in understanding the concept of recovery and how to make it the center of treatment goals. The VA has also organized a website of training and resources for non-VA clinicians who treat Veterans: http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/communityproviders/index. However, the most visible proponents of recovery at every VA Medical Center are the peer support specialists.

Peer support specialists are people who have experienced mental illness and treatment, some have schizophrenia. They have completed special training and work to offer other Veterans their own unique insights and encouragement on the journey to recovery. Just like Mr Jepson is doing in his First Person Account, peer support specialists present their “lessons learned.”

After 10 years of fighting, Mr Jepson’s battle still is not over. His enemies are all around him: voices, alcohol, paranoia, medication side-effects. But he has found some weapons for himself in this fight. I am glad he has shared them with us because they are weapons others can use. And the most important lesson learned is hope.