

What makes a Good Mental Health Service ?

A View from Service users

Introduction

The following are excerpts taken from a record of a day spent in Autumn 1999 at Ham Convent. The day was in response to a Purchasing Manager's invitation to the Westminster user groups to take part in his monitoring of the contracts he administers. Accordingly, the user groups came together to discuss some basic principles and indicators by which to assess a service

The record is constructed as a series of responses by the group to questions asked by the user support worker.

The day was relaxed, the environment peaceful. The conditions were therefore conducive to free speaking and accurate listening.

User Views on the Good Service

1. The Good Reception

Reception acts

as a place of welcome
as a security guard post.

How can it do both jobs well ?

Reception gives the newcomer his first impression of the whole organisation.

Your experience of Reception tells you whether or not you matter to the people who run this place.

A well-presented Reception tells you that people are properly cared about here.

Users understand the need for security, but tend to be more interested in the need for a sensitive reception.

The reason is that the moments of coming into hospital are often the worst moments of your life.

What do you look for at the entrance/the waiting room ?

the place clean and cared for

magazines/newspapers up to date, in tune with what people normally read

decor on walls warm mellow colours - like Peach

poems on display - such as poems by Blake - a human touch

no Us and Them

- ie receptionists friendly and unafraid

- no screens please !

*- no cold stares from between a phalanx of bottoms
as domestic staff, surrounding the reception desk,
to chat to the porter, turn to study the newcomer –
this was a scene repeated many times during the
evenings in a London hospital)*

we accept a camera at the door is needed - but let it be discrete

A decent welcome sign – but let the words be backed up by welcoming behaviour.

A Good Model : Local users have visited the reception area of a newish hospital in Waltham Forest, in which the receptionist there sat behind an open desk. She wore smart clothes and behaved like a hotel receptionist, not like some security guard. There were sliding glass doors at the front of the building that acted as the front entrance and then more on her inner side - so that the reception area was a kind of porch at the front of the building, obviously secure in case of need, but not looking like a kind of user-hostile Maginot Line. Great big pot plants everywhere. Carpets. Ceilings fairly low and comfortable feeling. Nice soft colours.

This was not some private Clinic for stressed pop stars. It was an ordinary National Health hospital catering for acute patients.

Receptionist staff maybe need to be properly trained and supported - and recruited more carefully with regard to their attitude to mental ill-health and their ability to relate properly

Staff need to be cheery

Might training for all staff be relevant for some services, that would culminate in a protocol for how a service should look and/or welcome its users ?

1. The Good Building

General Appearance

It's clean and cared for, its appearance reflects the caring attitude of the people who run it

magazines/newspaper

up to date, in tune with what people normally read

decor on walls

warm mellow colours - like Peach

poems - such as poems by Blake - a human touch

furniture

clean, good quality, nice colours

kitchen

kept open and clean

opportunities for privacy

code chimes ?

examples of homeliness (cf institution)

curtains, flowers, plants, the sound of water - calming.

What about having a quiet room for people to retreat to ? (but well supervised, so that you won't be molested there)

size of rooms - a comfortable size, where you feel in scale

cleanliness - very important

plants - lots please, well cared for

pictures - interesting, please.

outlook

we have visited a hospital where there were bays along the corridors with ceiling to floor windows. The bays were small, just big enough for three or four chairs. They looked out on green space, the garden area. It was striking how popular they were. Some of the bays weren't meant for chairs and yet still patients pushed chairs over to them so that they could sit there and look out. Often for hours. A combination, perhaps, of the view, the looking out at something peaceful ; and of that space, both containing because small, but not restrictive because there was no 4th wall. You could be alone there but not cut off.

other

no harassment

areas for no smoking

kept clean (cf 209 courtyard where the bikes are - full of rubbish)

coffee machine

staff cheery - not suspicious

The Ward - what's it like to arrive there

These are more big moments -

The staff look at the newcomer and think, oh-oh, who's this then ?

And the newcomer is screaming inside, in a state of shock and horror.

What the newcomer needs is -

someone to come to you in a friendly way and spend time with you

someone to sit with you

someone to be with you while you settle down and find your feet

someone to get you refreshments, and show you round when you're ready to take it in.

Maybe you want to ring a friend or your family. You may need help to do so.

And what about if you arrive and the kitchen's locked for the night? Is there another way to get a drink or snack?

Some Tips and Images from Ward life

Someone now attending a day centre said he has much more care there than ever he had in hospital. At the day centre, workers have time for you and show genuine interest in you. In the hospital you don't get to know staff. They treat you from behind a barrier "as if you're contagious."

The giving out of medication - it's not so bad as it used to be, when you queued up for your daily dose. But even now it's just a doling out. No discussion on why, no information on side-effects.

You feel lost and isolated. You ask the nurse, can I see the doctor? And the nurse says, you can see the doctor tomorrow, dear. But you never do. The nurse was just saying that to get you off her back.

Sometimes when you're psychotic you have to be given an injection. It helps, even in that state, to be told what the nurse is doing and why. It helps if people keep in touch with you, even if you're in no state to reply.

The wards need social workers to help people deal with what's going on outside - like DSS and Housing. Didn't they have social workers once? What's happened to them?

Sometimes it seems that staff only like you if you're getting well. One of our colleagues remembered she didn't get well for a long time and she thought her psychiatrist began to resent her for that, treating her more and more aggressively.

It must be hard to avoid a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness on the part of staff, dealing with people who don't get better. But new drugs have changed that now and there is hope.

We met a chaplain recently who said that the role he plays is not so much to bring religion into the place, but plain ordinary human contact. Can it be true that staff nowadays are so busy, or so overwhelmed by the need to cover themselves in paperwork, that plain ordinary human contact can only be delivered by an occasional visitor wearing a dog-collar?

3. The Good Worker

What help do you need/expect from your workers?

they make helpful suggestions
they help you carry the weight of decision-making
they explain things to you
they give practical help
they act as an advocate for you, whether or not they agree with you
you can unload onto them
they make you feel you're worth something

What qualities do they need to have?

*to be sincere/genuine
to be respectful/empathic
good listening, sincere and sympathetic
to treat you as a whole person, not a "case"
they address you from the heart, not from the book*

What skills/knowledge do they need ?

*local knowledge, knowledge of how to unlock the systems, how to navigate the maze
they should know what's going on
they should understand mental health issues*

How can you tell a good worker/good staff team ?

*people are punctual, they keep their appointments, or apologise with real sincerity when they
are late
they show their commitment by doing what they say they'll do
their office or centre has a welcoming feel to it - effort is made to attend to the visitor's feelings
they're happy. A worker or team that's happy makes the users of the service they give happy
a team which has unity of purpose, and can offer swift response when necess.*

*a team in which there is easy communication between workers, a happy feeling
a worker/team which communicates carefully with service users, so that they always know
what's going on
a worker/team which includes the user in the decisions made about the case and includes
user in recording it.
records are open - you all take part in making the record - you agree what should go down*

Indicators of a Good Worker

The following list was offered as the collected thoughts over the years of other users elsewhere, when asked what makes a good worker. Everyone present agreed with the list and added a couple of thoughts at the end :

warmth

calm and stable

good understanding of your difficulties

good knowledge of local services

good knowledge of mental health issues

good accurate listening, with evidence for that listening

punctuality

what other ?

*empathic, a close contact
someone who's physical, not afraid of touching*

The Good Care Manager

*gets you in touch with Benefits /resources
gives you advice on facilities
attends to your general well-being
is good at liaising
needs to be patient, friendly, outgoing - not "official"
can be contacted easily ; responds quickly*

The Good CPN

*gives injections with respect for your feelings
gives injections in negotiation with user - ie there's choice and flexibility
and the user participates in the discussion on pros and cons
turns up when expected (some don't)
listens well to you as a person and doesn't just prick your bum
keeps confidentiality
isn't too busy to talk to you properly*

The Good Psychiatrist

*isn't pompous
doesn't strut about
isn't rude or arrogant or childish
listens
has time
keeps to time*

The good GP

ditto psychiatrist

respects the fact your body sometimes needs treatment and not just your mind ; doesn't think ah, it's all in his/her mind, if you go to him/her with a physical complaint. (It often happens that mental health service users are not believed when they go for physical treatments). Our problems may be mental health ones, but we have bodies too and they should not be neglected.

has good communication with other services

notes by Rogan Wolf