

Physical Health Screening – Information for Staff

Background information

Looking after your physical health is important and can be difficult. People with a mental illness, often find looking after their physical health particularly difficult. This can be a result of several factors including the symptoms of their illness, side effects from medication and the fact that sometimes a consumer's physical health can get overlooked when the focus is on their mental health. The overall death rate of people with a mental illness is 2.5 times higher than the general population¹. People with mental illness are known to suffer poorer nutrition, dental decay and are more vulnerable to chronic conditions like diabetes and heart disease.

The Victorian Mental Health Reform Strategy has identified Physical Health as a priority area and outlined the fostering of an integrated response to people's physical health needs and mental health problems as a key objective². Furthermore, a report released in 2011 by the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Mental Health provides advice on the specific role clinical mental health services and PDRSS should play, as part of a broader health care system, in reducing the prevalence of poor physical health outcomes in those people with serious mental illness³.

What is health screening?

Health screening is a way of asking consumers how they feel about their physical health and wellbeing. It can assist consumers to identify potential health problems early and empower them to take some control over their health. This is done through asking consumer's questions to help them think about their health. It is important to note that this screening is not an assessment but rather an initial needs identification. If there is something that you and the consumer decides needs attention then a referral can be made to their doctor, local community health service or other service for further assessment and advice.

What happens with this information?

The information will assist services to identify other health needs a consumer may have. A copy of the consumer's health screen will be stored in their file with another copy to be provided to the consumer. A referral to another service will only be made with consent from the consumer. With consumer consent, a copy of the consumer's health screen can be sent to assist another service with the consumer's care.

Can a client refuse a health screen?

Yes, a consumer can refuse to undertake a health screen or request that it be completed at another time. If the consumer is happy to undertake a health screen but is uncomfortable with specific questions, they have the right to refuse to answer these questions.

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¹ Coglan, R. Lawrence, D. Holman, D. & Jablensky, A. (2001). Duty to Care. Physical illness in people with mental illness. Department of Public Health and Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Science. The University of Western Australia, 2001.

² Department of Human Services. (2009). Because Mental Health Matters: Victorian Mental Health Reform Strategy 2009 – 2019

³ Ministerial Advisory Committee for Mental Health (MAC) (2011) Improving the physical health of people with severe mental illness. Accessed: <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/search.htm?q=mac+improving+the+physical+health+of+people+with+severe+mental+illness>