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Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine, 40 (2023).
doi:10.1017/ipm.2020.118

Is sharing really caring? A vision or an aspiration? Irelands new mental health policy 2020

2020 will be remembered mainly for the COVID-19 pandemic faced by humanity. However, it will also be the year of the Irish mental health policy document ‘*Sharing the Vision: A Mental Health Policy for Everyone*’ (Department of Health, 2020). Irish mental health services have been longing for a new policy, which can turn aspirations outlined in ‘*A Vision for Change*’ in 2006 into reality (Department of Health, 2006). In the current circumstances of mental health service delivery, recovery as an ethos is widely accepted, with its philosophy focused on interventions that are holistic, co-produced and led by the service user. Medication is no longer seen as the only road to recovery (Brosnan & Sapouna, 2015; Norton, 2019; Swords & Houston, 2020).

Such changes included the closure of the traditional asylums of the time, the movement of services from inpatient units to more community-based services and finally through allowing service users to become more involved in their care. As of 2020, we have achieved many of these policy objectives, however, the Department of Health recognises that there is still a way to go before we reach an optimal service for everyone. As such, on 17 June 2020, after much consultation with parties both within and external to the service, a new policy document was launched, which aimed to acknowledge what we as a service have achieved and what we need to do going forward. This policy document is known as ‘*Sharing the Vision*’.

Simultaneous to this, the recovery approach, which has come more to the fore since the civil rights movement of the 1960s/70s is also undergoing a period of change. Since the civil rights movement, and indeed since the launch of Advancing Recovery in Ireland in 2013, recovery, as we know it, has been constructed from the words of William Anthony. Here, recovery is seen as:

“a way of living a satisfying, hopeful, and contributing life even with the limitations caused by illness. Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one’s life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness.” (Anthony, 1993, p. 15)

Nowadays, however, a new subcategory of recovery has been uncovered based on the work of Ramon (2018). This is known as social recovery. Social recovery

looks at what resources a person needs to support themselves to recover. Social recovery is largely focused on how society supports individuals living with mental illness to become citizens in society who are active and have a strong sense of belonging (Ramon, 2018).

In a recent critical literature review conducted by Norton & Swords (2020), this type of recovery has six recovery influencers all of which work together to support the individual in their recovery: Health, Economics, Social Interaction/Connection, Housing, Personal Relationships and Supports. These factors are key indicators when it comes to promoting the social recovery of those living with mental illness in our society. But how can this new concept be implemented going forward?

When focusing on the new policy document, is sharing really caring? In other words, by telling people that we will support you to live the life you want to lead following an acute episode, are the policy provisions providing the adequate influencers? The new document does present an ambitious plan which aims to move from secondary care to preventive initiatives. With all policies introduced, significant monetary investment is always needed for transformations to take place.

Subsequently, the key recovery influencers of social recovery are evident throughout this document. Therefore, services must consider, and adopt these pillars of social recovery when seeking to implement a policy, which is not just sharing but caring for those on their life trajectory. Ultimately, it is only through an organisational commitment, which places emphasis on clear roles and responsibilities in integrating and developing services in line with the new policies aims and objectives, that hope might be realised for those using services.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Financial support

The correspondence received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial or not-for-profit sector.

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