

# Letters to the Editor

## Mental Health Reform

### To The Editor:

Thank you for dedicating a recent issue to a discussion of mental health reform in North Carolina. While waving the flags of lower costs and better services, politicians and administrators in state government are radically changing the mental health delivery system. The Department of Health and Human Services is reducing the number of hospital beds for severely mentally ill; thereby, forcing these patients to seek treatment, if they so choose, from private or community resources. At the same time, the administration is pushing local communities to reduce direct service and hire private providers to meet the needs of the mentally ill, developmentally disabled, and substance abuse patients. Doctors Marvin Swartz, Joseph Morrissey, and Nicholas Stratas have written extensively of the numerous problems with proposed reforms. It strikes me that these problems encompass three primary areas with financial concerns at the heart of each.

First, there are limited numbers of well-trained private clinicians who can offer wide-ranging multidisciplinary services to the targeted population. I suspect only a small fraction of this population of clinicians will be willing to provide services for reimbursement typically offered by the government. And which of these clinicians will cooperate with quality assurance requirements (assuming the state will demand and measure quality service)?

Second, community resources either don't exist, are grossly inadequate, or severely under-funded. Alternative treatment services are simply unavailable in many areas. And don't underestimate the confusion and diffusion of responsibility that will occur when two areas or counties argue over which is responsible for treating a particular patient. In addition some patient care providers working in community as well as state facilities have sought employment elsewhere because they are fearful of



losing their jobs as a result of the state's plans to "reform" the mental health system.

Third, under the state's plans, patients and family members will face one more hurdle in seeking treatment since the facilities where they have been treated will not provide direct services. They will be directed elsewhere. One can only guess how much support and guidance these persons will receive as they navigate the "reformed" system. And one can only guess about the financial concerns and questions these persons will have when they are sent to private providers. Indeed, this assumes that the patient makes a rational decision to continue to pursue treatment at another time, in another place, from another provider, and while facing uncertain financial responsibilities.

Many letters and articles highly critical of the state's mental health "reform" have been printed. It is unfortunate how timely and prescient those admonitions have been. A few weeks ago a store in Raleigh was robbed and police were called. A man scuffled with them and bystanders and reached for a policeman's pistol. The man was subdued but then dropped dead. Police officers and rescue personnel made heroic efforts, but the lives of all involved were forever altered. We later learned the man was mentally ill, not taking medications or receiving treatment, abusing cocaine, and a danger to himself and others. To complicate matters even further, there had been some sort of dispute between two counties centering on whether and how to have this individual committed.

In the past this man may well have been readily committed to a state psychiatric hospital; his illness stabilized, and he and the public protected from harm. Today there are fewer hospital beds and limited community resources available to treat the mentally ill, and patient care providers are leaving the system. Those that remain in the system face the impossible task of providing quality care with fewer resources. Sick, vulnerable people are being denied appropriate care. If the state has its way, the future may hold for us more senseless crime, violence, homelessness and death. And we'll be reading and hearing more tragic stories involving the mentally ill and developmentally disabled.

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