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Consumer Responsibility in Health Care: Selecting Mental Health Care

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Mental health is important to all of us, but when something goes wrong, many of us are unsure of our options. Just as with any health care concern, good consumer skills are important when seeking appropriate mental health services.

A National Concern

In February 2000, the U.S. Surgeon General revealed that one out of every five Americans experiences a mental disorder. This figure contradicts stereotypes of mental illness. With mental illness occurring at this level, it's likely that all of us are affected.

The reality is that all of us are "mentally unhealthy" at times. We have bad days. We lose our tempers. We need to be alone sometimes. Often the passage of time helps us work out our problems. However, when we are unable to work or personal and/or family relationships are suffering, it may no longer be an issue of "pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps." It may be time to get help.

Mental illness can be "as disabling and serious as cancer and heart disease in terms of premature death and lost productivity" (Satcher, 2000). Unlike physical ailments, most people with severe mental illness do not seek treatment. As we choose a good physician for an injury that impedes our enjoyment in life, choosing a good mental health professional is a logical step when our lives are disrupted by mental illness.

Challenges in Getting Mental Health Care

Mental health care has not been around as long as physical health care. As a result, the profession is less regulated. A person's mental health is harder to study scientifically.

The mental health field has found effective treatments for most mental disorders. Many illnesses are

caused by an imbalance of chemicals in the brain or by a change in hormone levels. Some can be treated with medication. Others are a result of experience, behavior, perceptions, addictions, or other psychological circumstances and are best treated with counseling therapy. Whether through proper medication, appropriate counseling, or both, *help can be found*.

Help is sometimes hard to find. For some rural Nebraskans, mental health care is several hours away. Over half of Nebraska's counties have four or fewer mental health care professionals; 30.1 percent have *none* (Nebraska Health Information Project, 1997). At the same time, suicide, substance abuse, divorce, and behavior problems in children and youth are all on the rise in rural communities (Nebraska Adolescents, 1997; Nebraska Health and Human Services, 1998).

What Are Your Options?

Being a responsible consumer is even more important with mental health providers. Fortunately, there are several different avenues to take in obtaining mental health care.

Four professions recognized as providers of mental health care services are psychiatrists, psychologists, marriage and family therapists, and licensed clinical social workers. Although the four fields have different approaches to treating mental illnesses, they may overlap in the kinds of mental illnesses they treat. Any of these therapists is qualified to help a client with most types of mental difficulties, such as depression, anxiety, or anger management. Only psychiatrists are able to prescribe medications.

Other options may include licensed professional counselors (LPCs), mental health practitioners, pastoral counselors, or school guidance counselors. These counselors usually have less training and are not monitored by professional organizations. There may be more risk of safety and confidentiality issues.

Many of these counselors will provide mental health services that are just as effective as those provided by the more recognized professions. Nebraska law requires that all professionals providing counseling services in Nebraska be licensed. *This is your protection*. Be an alert consumer and proceed with caution.

As with any purchased service, good consumer skills are essential to obtain quality mental health care. Some tips for finding the best mental health care professionals are:

- If multiple therapists are available, look for one that 'fits' you. Ask about counseling style. They should be able to describe their methods without getting into professional jargon.
- Look at credentials. Find out what the credentials mean regarding training, licensing and specialization.
- Ask about per-session charges up front. If you hear, "Don't worry about price. We'll talk when you come in," this should be a RED FLAG for you.
- If mental health care providers are not readily available, seeing your family practitioner is a good first step.
- If you are referred to a mental health professional, don't drive farther for a Ph.D. credential if other good licensed therapists are more accessible.
- Know your insurance plan! What mental health coverage exists? Is the co-pay different from

physical care? Are you limited in number of sessions? Is there a 'preferred' list of therapists, or a preferred type of therapist.

- Do your homework! If you feel you may have a mental illness, use the Internet or library for definitions and direction. You may find others with your symptoms who have found help. Recognize the privacy limitations of the Internet.
- If you decide to try a book, check the author's training and credentials. Is he/she a licensed therapist? Where was he/she trained? Does he/she have real experience? Try to find out if his/her ideas are backed by solid research.

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