fusebrief

Managing excess weight in adult secure mental health settings

People experiencing severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, often live with excess weight (overweight and obesity). This issue is most significant among patients in secure mental health settings, who are held in locked wards due to the risks posed to themselves or others.

This programme of work involved collaboration between Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Foundation Trust, and researchers at Newcastle University from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health. We wanted to understand more about the key challenges facing patients in secure (or forensic) mental healthcare around excess weight, and how we might improve services and support people better in future.

The research was mixed methods - combining numerical data (quantitative) and non-numerical data, like interviews or observations (qualitative) - and undertaken through four linked workstreams.

Firstly, we shared an anonymised online survey to all staff in secure settings, to explore views and experiences of weight management. We received responses from staff with wide-ranging roles, from across different parts of the secure service.

Next, the survey themes guided an ethnographic study, in which the lead researcher spent over six-months on a low-secure mental health ward. This involved observing events and interactions, talking and engaging with patients and staff, and making written notes. The ethnography aimed to record food and exercise activities on both weekdays and weekends, over a 24-hour period.

We then conducted focus groups separately with current patients, former patients, carers and staff. We used the insights from our survey and ethnographic work to explore what supports and hinders maintaining a healthy weight and related behaviours. We also undertook interviews with staff

at Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Trust, to gain a second, complementary perspective from another mental health trust.

In the final stage, we brought all the data together during two meetings with a diverse steering group. The group reviewed themes through clinical scenarios and evidence statements to identify key actions for future policy and practice.

People with lived experience of severe mental illness and secure mental healthcare were involved throughout the research, including in the oversight group.

Key Findings

- Overall, our research shows that patients in secure services live in an 'obesogenic' environment and culture which makes it much easier to become overweight or obese, rather than a healthy weight.

- Medications to treat psychosis tend to cause patients to gain large amounts of weight, and people in secure settings are generally inactive for most of the time. Patients generally dislike the catered hospital meals, which leads them to choose unhealthy food alternatives and snack frequently.

- Most people in secure services feel little motivation to change their patterns of behaviour. This is made worse by understaffing of the hospital wards, which means there is generally little time to promote health and exercise opportunities.

- Social activities and the wider culture in secure care generally revolve around unhealthy food, and staff often find it difficult to strike a balance between promoting healthy options and giving patients choice.

- Future interventions are likely to require a 'whole setting' approach, rather than focusing on one small issue. We need to develop plans and activities that include everyone involved in secure patient care, and address the whole range of current problems leading to excess weight.

Policy relevance and implications

- People experiencing severe mental illness often die 15-20 years earlier than the wider population, generally due to physical health conditions, which are often caused by excess weight.

- Patients tend to stay for long periods in secure hospitals - often several years - therefore it is particularly important for these environments to promote both physical and mental health.

- By developing a clear understanding of the factors that make it more, and less, likely for patients to experience overweight and obesity, we will be able to create healthier secure mental health settings in future.

- Building on the learning from this research, we will seek to work with patients, carers and staff to develop initiatives (or interventions) suitable for secure mental healthcare, to help patients maintain a healthy weight.

- In future, we would like to apply these insights to help support people with severe mental illness living outside of hospital, in the wider community, to live healthier lifestyles and avoid excess weight.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to use a focused ethnographic approach to explore weight management in a secure mental health setting.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

This study was focussed in secure mental healthcare, where people with severe mental illness are cared for in locked wards, and aimed to explore the influences and challenges around weight management.

Overall, we found that secure mental healthcare delivers an 'obesogenic' environment, where it is very difficult for patients to become and stay a healthy weight.

In future, broad interventions that address different aspects of this environment and culture are needed, to avoid obesity and promote healthier behaviours.

Understanding weight management in adult secure mental health services: findings from a mixed-methods study in Northern England | Emerald Insight

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FURTHER INFORMATION

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Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, is a collaboration of six Universities in the North East and North Cumbria of Durham, Cumbria, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside.

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