

WHO QualityRights: transforming mental health services



A movement to profoundly transform the way mental health care is delivered and to change attitudes towards people with psychosocial, intellectual, and cognitive disabilities is gaining momentum globally.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which came into effect in 2008, clearly shows that changing attitudes towards—and practices—in mental health care is not only a necessity, but also an obligation under international human rights law. The vision and principles expressed in the CRPD have spread across the UN system. For instance, key principles of the CRPD were integrated into the WHO comprehensive mental health action plan of 2013–20.¹ In July, 2016, a resolution² led by Portugal and Brazil was adopted by the human rights council, calling on states and other UN agencies to take steps towards ending the “widespread discrimination, stigma, prejudice, violence, social exclusion and segregation, unlawful or arbitrary institutionalization, overmedication and treatment practices [seen in the field of mental health] that fail to respect...autonomy, will and preferences”. As mandated by this resolution, the High Commissioner for human rights subsequently issued a report³ on mental health and human rights in January, 2017. This report³ recommended ending violations against people with psychosocial disabilities and people using mental health services, and included recommendations related to capacity building and technical support. Separate to this, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health also issued a landmark report⁴ in May, 2017, on the right to mental health, which denounced abuses and harmful practices in psychiatry and pressed for a “paradigm shift” in the field. In his report, the special rapporteur also noted that we are at a “juncture in history” in which “the current momentum and opportunity to advance are unique”.⁴ A key recommendation of the report was for countries to seek technical assistance from the WHO QualityRights initiative.

The QualityRights initiative⁵ is WHO’s response to the challenges that are documented so well in these reports. Through this global initiative, WHO is working to improve the quality of care provided by mental health services and promote the human rights of people with psychosocial, intellectual, and cognitive disabilities. The initiative offers a new approach to mental health care

that is rights based and recovery oriented. Freedom from coercive interventions, respect for the right to legal capacity, and promotion of autonomy, choice, community inclusion and recovery are at the core of the initiative. The five main objectives of the initiative are to increase capacity to understand and promote human rights, recovery, and independent living in the community; create community-based and recovery-oriented services that respect and promote human rights; improve the quality of care and human rights conditions in mental health and related services; develop a civil society movement to influence policy making and advocate for the integration of a human rights approach in mental health; and reform national policies and legislations in line with the CRPD and other international human rights standards.

One of the most recent developments of the QualityRights initiative has been the publication of a set of 15 training and guidance modules.⁶ These modules help to build capacity among multiple stakeholders to change attitudes and practices in services and the community, and to create new services—including peer support—and strengthen civil society and advocacy efforts. These training modules have been developed in collaboration with more than 100 national and international actors including: disabled people’s organisations; non-governmental organisations; people with lived experience; family, care partners, and professionals working in mental health or related areas; human rights activists; lawyers; and others.

To support the transformation of mental health services, WHO QualityRights is currently developing a best practice guide. This guide will identify, describe and provide evaluation data for good, promising, and emerging community-based mental health and related support and services that are responsive to people’s needs, promote recovery, and are in line with international human rights standards. It will highlight services that operate without coercion, promote respect for the right to legal capacity, involve individuals with lived experience in the framing, delivery, and monitoring of the service, enable community inclusion, and support recovery. Showing that these types of services exist and are effective is key to inspiring policy makers and other key actors to



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take steps and spread new and innovative approaches to mental health care across the world.

Although implementation of this initiative is just starting, response to date in different parts of the world has been extremely positive.^{7,8} Changing attitudes and practices in mental health is not easy and will take time. Nevertheless, the WHO QualityRights initiative has shown that transformative action can be taken and can profoundly change people's lives.⁸

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