

Fisher: Mentally ill deserve chance at better life

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"I promised myself I wouldn't cry," the woman said.

But she couldn't tell her story without crying.

Her son was diagnosed with schizophrenia as a teenager. For seven years she's watched him deteriorate. Even with insurance, it's difficult to get long-term treatment. She can't find doctors in her network who take new patients. Getting reimbursed is a nightmare.

"I'm afraid I'm going to lose him," she said between heavy sighs.

Since last week, when I wrote about the distressing shortage of mental health care in America, I've heard many stories like hers. The stories make me sad. They also make me angry.

Why does our health care system treat diseases of the brain differently from diseases of other organs like the heart or the lungs? Why should mentally ill people endure more layers of bureaucracy than other sick people?

Can't get treatment

"People in a mental health crisis are the least able to battle the system," said Karen Vicari of the Mental Health Association in California. As a result, they wind up in emergency rooms - or on the streets or in jail - because they can't get treatment.

It wasn't supposed to be that way. In 1999, California passed a law that said health insurance policies had to provide the same level of coverage for major mental illnesses as they provide for other diseases. Unfortunately, most people don't know they have a right to that coverage, so they don't demand it.

The 1999 law only covers a few illnesses, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. And it's vague about what constitutes equal coverage. For example, if you have a heart attack, your hospital stay, prescription drugs and follow-up visits are probably insured. But mental illness may require extended residential treatment and years of therapy. Most insurance plans won't pay for that.

The situation could improve soon, though, thanks to a freshman assemblyman from San Jose.

Back when he was on the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, Jim Beall was a strong advocate for the mentally ill. Now that he's in Sacramento, he's trying to plug the loopholes in the 1999 law. He introduced AB423, which expands coverage for just about all mental illnesses, including substance abuse. And it requires new health care plans to cover diagnosis and all necessary treatment.

Beall's bill will be heard Tuesday by the Assembly's health committee. The health insurance industry is likely to oppose it, but he hopes strong support from the medical community and social-services agencies will carry it through.

'Good medicine'

"The cure for the mental health crisis is good medicine," Beall said. "We've recognized that it's more cost-effective to deal with problems early, instead of paying the social costs of prisons, domestic violence and unemployment."

AB423 addresses only one small part of the mental health crisis, of course. Don't have insurance? With counties cutting back on services, it's harder and harder to get help.

And what about mentally ill people who don't know they are ill, or who refuse treatment?

"The ill brain has difficulty knowing that it's ill," said John Mitchem, president of the local chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Mitchem raises a difficult question, one that goes to the heart of our discomfort with mental illness.

How can we allow people we care about to refuse treatment for mental illness? We wouldn't allow people with Alzheimer's disease to wander the streets and sleep under bridges.

"Alzheimer's is a brain disease," he said. "Why do we treat people with other brain diseases differently?"

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

For information about AB423, e-mail Assemblyman Jim Beall at assemblymember.beall@assembly.ca.gov. For information about mental health patient rights, log on to the Mental Health Association in California Web site (www.mhac.org).

Contact Patty Fisher at pfisher@mercurynews.com or (650) 688-7510.

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