
ANOTHER VOICE / MENTAL HEALTH

Ann DiChristina: How far have we really come in helping the suffering?

By Ann DiChristina

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1 Comment

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I had the recent displeasure of visiting the CPEP unit in Erie County Medical Center. This is the psychiatric emergency room for people in crisis. My daughter, 28, has been suffering with bipolar disorder for the last 10 years. On the night of our visit, she told me that she was having suicidal thoughts. After calling Crisis Services, we were instructed to go to ECMC. What awaited us there was nothing short of a scene from the Dark Ages.

We were ushered into the unit with few words. A woman took my daughter's personal belongings and told us to find a seat "somewhere," and left us. The staff was positioned behind glass, separate from the waiting area. We proceeded to a dirty room with bright fluorescent ceiling lights, mustard yellow walls, a small TV set on the wall and large brown plastic chairs lining the walls. We sat, distraught and overwhelmed, and began our waiting.

As I looked around the room, I couldn't help but notice the despondency and despair in the eyes of not only the patients, but also the family members. Here we were, afraid for the welfare of ourselves and our loved ones, and there was nobody to care or comfort us as we waited. Nothing in our surroundings communicated to us any semblance of hope.

At one point, a woman came out and offered us some warm bottled water, and said that they were backed up, and it would be a while. I think that except for that, we all felt invisible. How far have we come from straitjackets and asylums? How far have we come from treating the mentally ill as less than human? The brief shining light was a visit from a nurse named Tony. After five and a half hours of waiting, he offered my daughter a blanket and a kind word.

Since that visit, I have reflected on visits to Roswell Park Cancer Institute when my mom was battling cancer. We were greeted with a deluge of pastel color, friendly faces and soft music. Everything said, "You shall not be in pain while you are here, you shall not suffer without dignity for your humanity."

I have also reflected on visits to hospice, as my mother lay dying. Again, pastels, dim lights and soft spoken words conveyed to me and my family that we had dignity in our humanity even in death. It doesn't take much to heal a wounded heart.

Where is that dignity for our mentally ill? I am a mother who provided safety and dignity to my baby girl throughout her life, only to suffer with her at ECMC during a very dark period. The only reason we endured the horror was the fact that my daughter needed her medication changed, and there was a psychiatrist at the end of the torturous wait.

It is evident that a stigma regarding mental illness exists in our culture. We can try to change it in the media and in our families, but until our mental health care providers extend human dignity to those who suffer in crisis situations, I am afraid it will not change when and where it counts the most.

Ann DiChristina of West Seneca is the mother of a woman with bipolar disorder.

Comments

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My deepest sympathies to you and your daughter. We experienced something very similar at CPEP approximately 10 years ago, including witnessing physical violence by a staff member against an unconscious patient. Apparently, nothing has changed in that time. I raised a fuss with the hospital after we finally got out of there six hours later. (I was active as a psychologist at the time.)As far as I know, the only action taken was an apology to us for a missing Patients Rights sign.You are right. Our care for people with mental illriess in our community is nothing short of scandalous.Thank you for writing as you did.

MARTHA DEED, NORTH TONAWANDA, NY on Mon Jan 31, 2011 at 10:38 AM

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