GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH PEER NETWORK

Unapologetically Experts By Experience

Position statement on the human rights of substance users

Purpose of the Statement

This position statement is informed by the experiences of our members, and reaffirms the protection and promotion of the human rights of substance users. It is integral to our collective pursuit of justice, dignity, and equality for all individuals. We uphold and recognize the human rights of substance users, ensuring they are treated with respect, compassion, and dignity throughout all stages of their journey.

Human Rights of Individuals affected by Substance Use

The World Health Organisation's (WHO) International standards for treatment states that "treatment for drug use disorders should be based on universal ethical healthcare standards – including respect for human rights and the patient's dignity. This includes responding to the right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health and well-being and avoiding any form of discrimination and/or stigmatization." This reinforces our work within the Global Mental Health Peer Network (GMHPN) as advocacy leaders in the promotion of human rights for all.

A multidisciplinary approach to harm reduction

Substance use disorder (SUD) is a complex health condition that requires a comprehensive and rights-based approach free from discrimination. A report from WHO (2019) titled - The public health dimension of the world drug problem: how WHO works to prevent drug misuse, reduce harm and improve safe access to medicine further provides guidance on a public health approach, and recognises that a multidisciplinary approach is critical to addressing matters concerning substance problem at all levels. This approach involves recognising substance use as a public health issue rather than a criminal justice matter. Elza Berk, Global Mental Health Peer Network (GMHPN) country representative from South Africa corroborates this and speaks from her experience by saying "Addiction is not treated as a mental health issue but is still seen as a choice".

This multidisciplinary approach prioritises harm reduction, access to evidence-based treatment and support services, and the protection of the rights and dignity of individuals affected by substance use. It prioritizes compassion, health equity and social justice. By recognising and respecting the rights and dignity of substance users, we can create inclusive, just, and supportive communities for all.

Moreover, punitive drug policies resulting in criminalisation and incarceration, often exacerbate the harms associated with the harms of substance use and violate the human rights of affected individuals.

Stigma & discrimination affecting substance users

Stigma surrounding SUD's has profound implications on individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole. Marcel Niezan GMHPN country representative from the Netherlands notes that, in general, addiction does not differentiate between country, race, religion, income or social background.

According to an article published by Frontiers in Psychiatry titled "Stigma toward substance use disorders: a multinational perspective and call for action", stigma surrounding persons living with substance use disorders (SUDs) is a universal phenomenon that has and continues to have, detrimental effects on affected individuals, their families, healthcare providers, treatment outcomes, research, policies, and society as a whole. Stigma toward SUDs exceeds that of other mental health conditions and is a common obstacle to help-seeking behaviour among individuals with SUDs.

By challenging societal attitudes and perceptions surrounding addiction, we can create a more supportive environment that empowers individuals to seek help and access the resources they need for recovery. Numan Miah, GMHPN country representative from the UK states that he found himself desperately alone and unemployed, which pushed him further to use as he felt he could not approach the health system.

Legal obligations

Upholding the rights of substance users is not only a moral imperative but also a legal obligation under international law. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, (United Nations General Assembly, 1948) outlines fundamental human rights principles that apply to all individuals, including those with substance use disorders. These rights include the right to health, the right to be free from discrimination, the right to privacy, and the right to be treated with dignity and respect. The UN declaration supports the principle of human rights for substance users as per this statement.

Recommendation

Our recommendation is for all mental health stakeholders including substance use care workers and people with lived experience to focus on prevention, treatment and harm reduction through a human rights-based approach to substance use care.

As experts by virtue of our experience, we call for mental health policies to be grounded in compassion, health equity that follows human rights principles. These policies should focus on prevention, treatment and harm reduction while addressing the social determinants of substance use such as poverty, trauma and inequality. Furthermore, it is essential to involve people with lived experience (PWLE) in the development, implementation and evaluation of programmes that affect them. In the Lancet Commission on ending stigma and discrimination, Thornicroft et al. [2022], "The Lancet Commission on ending stigma and discrimination in mental health" emphasizes the importance of involving people with lived experience in eradicating stigma and discrimination. Meaningful participation ensures responsiveness to the needs and experiences of affected communities and promotes accountability and transparency in decision making processes.