Sexuality – a taboo sphere when the care systems meet people with a severe mental illness

Margareta Östman Prof. Faculty of Health and Society, Malmö University

Aim: To illuminated the everyday sexuality and sex lives and needs of support in this area of people with severe mental illness, SMI, three studies were accomplished (Östman, 2008, Östman&Björkman 2013, Östman 2014).

Background: Research on people with SMI and sexuality has found dysfunction among such patients far beyond levels in the general population. Recommendations on matters related to sex as part of the total recovery process often do not exist for them.

Method: Interview studies with 40 persons with SMI living in the community, The questions inquired about experience of sex life and factors considered important for an active sex life as well as questions about those who provided support in sexual matters..

Results: Sexuality and intimate relations were generally experienced as out of reach or something of secondary importance that had to be controlled.

No one we interviewed had reason to believe that psychiatric, somatic, or social service caregivers would provide them with any support relating to sexual needs as part of their regular treatment regimes.

Furthermore, they state that they would like to discuss issues relating to relationships, including sexual ones, and would welcome support from health care services in these matters.

Conclusion: Our findings showed that clinicians tend to be reluctant to address sexual issues when treating people with SMI, although people with SMI experience a dysfunctional sex life, and point to a lack of counseling on intimate relationships and sex.

These findings validate earlier research conclusions that psychiatric staff and other service providers avoid the issue of sexuality in treating people with SMI.