

IIMHL & IIDL Leadership Briefing XXI

Scotland: Actions for COVID-19

29 July 2020

Introduction

This briefing focuses on the work undertaken in Scotland regarding COVID-19. It is a multipronged approach and may have benefits for other countries as they consider and plan their own way forward.

Dr John Mitchell, Interim Principal Medical Officer in the Mental Health Directorate of the Scottish Government noted in June 2020:

“The Scottish Government has established a Mental Health Research Advisory Group to monitor and identify emerging research to guide its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Advisory Group will follow research developments closely to understand the medium and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health. The Advisory Group is chaired by Professor Andrew Gumley and includes academics and public health experts from across Scotland.

Following its establishment the Advisory Group asked Public Health Scotland to compile a rapid evidence review on the impacts of COVID-19 on mental health. The review addresses the following questions:

- What impact is the COVID-19 pandemic having on mental health outcomes (using validated measures) at the population level?
- What risk and protective factors are associated with mental health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the key learnings and implications for Scotland?

The review has set out the methodological limitations of the emerging evidence and the need for caution in interpreting the findings:

- It is likely that there will be an increase in poorer mental health in Scotland and the distribution of impact is likely to reflect existing disparities and inequalities.
- A number of key groups are at higher risk of adverse mental health outcomes; these could include frontline staff who are working with COVID-19 patients, women, children and young people, those with a low educational level and individuals with underlying mental health conditions.
- Social and family support, hygiene measures and physical activity however appeared to safeguard mental health; some of these are consistent with protective factors recommended for good mental health in general.

The full report is available on the Public Health Scotland website:

<http://www.healthscotland.scot/media/3105/rapid-review-of-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-mental-health-june2020-english.pdf>

The Scottish Government Health and Social Care Analysis are also compiling regular research briefings on the emerging research and survey results on the mental health impacts of COVID-19. These briefings can be found on the Scottish Government webpages:

<https://www.gov.scot/groups/coronavirus-covid-19-mental-health-research-advisory-group/>.

Bringing together the outcomes and findings of these publications have led the Advisory Group towards eight key findings on what are understood to be the emerging mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland. They are as follows:

- 1. Pre-COVID, rising public awareness and demand for mental health treatment was outstripping supply.*
- 2. There are, and will be, different impacts on different populations mostly associated with traditional inequalities.*
- 3. Traumatic experience in acute hospitals and care homes for patients and those involved with them, including staff, could lead to mental health morbidity, requiring additional help.*
- 4. Early impact is higher level of distress. Later formal anxiety and depressive disorders are likely to emerge, as will greater rates of substance misuse, traumatic reactions, self-harm and suicide.*
- 5. An 8% current worsening of the incidence of mental health disorders is estimated. This is particularly for anxiety and mood disorders and particularly in young people and females.*
- 6. There will be challenge in meeting new need, and gearing back up services, but opportunities arise for better individualised approaches to personal wellbeing and mental health service delivery.*
- 7. The critical influence of inequalities will require cross Government work and commitment.*
- 8. Joint focus will be needed on both population wellbeing and on mental ill health. The evidence base is still developing but suggests there is a need for whole population approaches alongside targeted support for at risk and vulnerable groups.*

These are preliminary findings and the Advisory Group will continue to review these as further data and evidence emerges.

New Mental Health Support

In April 2020 the Scottish Government announced additional support to help people look after their mental health and wellbeing during and after the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has been announced by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon. The support includes an investment of more than £1 million towards the expansion of the Distress Brief Intervention (DBI) programme to help people in distress, and the launch of a new mental health marketing campaign across television, radio, print and online.

The DBI programme, which was previously operating in four pilot areas, will roll-out across Scotland, giving people over the age of 16 who are in emotional distress due to COVID-19 the opportunity to speak to specially trained staff. People who are in distress but do not need clinical intervention will be referred to the DBI programme by frontline staff, including NHS 24.

<https://www.gov.scot/news/new-mental-health-support/>