

MEDIA RELEASE

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NEW GLOBAL SURVEY REVEALS CARERS' ANGUISH WHEN PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS STOP TAKING MEDICATION

(Sydney, AUSTRALIA) -- A first-of-its-kind international survey released today highlights the devastating consequences that regularly occur when people with serious mental illness discontinue their medication and subsequently relapse.

The *Keeping Care Complete*ⁱ survey canvassed nearly 1000 carers from Australia, Canada, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The research shows that relapse has widespread impacts beyond the individual, placing great strain on those caring for people with mental illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Significantly, the survey shows 96% of Australian carers whose family member had relapsed, said it had affected their own life substantially, versus only 61% of the global sample. Respondents also believe relapse drastically reduced the chance of improvements to their loved one's overall quality of life and that medication was pivotal to any plan for long-term wellness.

"This survey confirms that appropriate use of medication underpins recovery from these illnesses, and emphasises the short- and long-term quality of life gains not only for the consumer but also the carer, from finding and staying on the right one," said Margaret Springgay, Executive Director, Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia.

"This research also for the first time quantifies at an international level the common plight of carers of people with mental illness," Springgay said.

Some 89% of local respondents said relapse had damaged their own mental and physical health, and 90% are also concerned for their family member's wellbeing. Fear for their own safety and financial impacts are other effects of relapse on Australian carers, 42% of whom spend 20 hours a week or more caring for their loved one.

Springgay said carers are hurting from a number of problems endemic in the Australian system. These include a lack of co-ordination in treatment plans at the point of discharge from hospital, a drastic shortage in subsidised housing, few supported work programs and limited availability of psychosocial rehabilitation.

"The failure to have a holistic mental health service can see many people discharged into the community without the support needed to keep them well," she said. "The carers' perspective confirms that these people are vulnerable to relapse and that, without community support, it is virtually impossible for them to reclaim their lives," said Springgay.

Discontinuation of medication is recognised by carers as a key factor in relapse, with 94% of Australian respondents reporting that a relapse occurred when their family member stopped taking their medication. In 86% of cases in Australia, relapse resulted in hospitalisation for the family member, versus only 69% of international cases.

For 48% of Australian carers, their loved one had experienced a relapse more than five times. Carers report feeling sad, helpless and frustrated as a result of any relapse.

"The message from this survey is that, while finding the right medication can be a long and difficult process, it is nonetheless the cornerstone for stabilisation of symptoms before any other aspects of wellness can be contemplated," Springgay said.

Ramifications of medication discontinuation for mental health consumers as identified by carers include: relationships being jeopardised (91%), being hospitalised (78%), being unable to work (28%) and attempting suicide (22%).

All the Australian carers surveyed agreed that the goal of treatment should be to maintain wellness, and 77% strongly agreed that symptom control must be established before tackling other aspects of overall wellbeing.

"A relapse is extremely difficult and disruptive for the family and often terrifying for the person being cared for. After an episode, the person may suffer from post-traumatic stress, as they recall their psychosis and feel the stigma attached to such an episode. Medication has helped to reduce the number of these episodes," said Alex Rivers, who cares for her son, diagnosed with schizophrenia 18 years ago, on a daily basis. Rivers is Vice-President of the Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW.

Australian carers report multiple benefits for their loved one staying on a medication that works, including: managing or improving symptoms (88%); improving quality of life (78%); increasing social contact (69%); sleeping better (67%); and improving memory and concentration (58%).

Moreover, carers reported that successful treatment reduced their own stress levels and interpersonal tension, and increased the amount of quality time they could spend with their family. Importantly, 88% also report they were able to support their family member remaining out of hospital as a result of effective treatment.

As well as medication, 97% of Australian carers report that family support is a key factor in keeping family members well. Community resources are valued by carers, with physical health programs nominated by 92% as being valuable, along with mental health and other support groups.

Keeping Care Complete is the first international survey to shed light on experiences and insights of family carers of individuals living with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder. Carers surveyed were the parent, the child, the spouse or the sibling of the loved one. The survey was jointly developed by the World Federation for Mental Health and Eli Lilly and Company. For further information, visit www.mfmh.com

Carers seeking support can contact:

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia -1800 985 944

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About MIFA

The Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia is a national organisation with state and territory member organisations dedicated to improving outcomes for people with mental illness and psychiatric disability and their carers through: Influencing mental health policy; Establishing, piloting and evaluating innovative national programs; raising awareness and increasing mental health literacy; and promoting optimal lifestyles with support based on need for housing, employment, education and other domains critical to quality of life. Visit: www.mifa.org.au

About WFMH

The World Federation for Mental Health is an international interdisciplinary membership organisation whose mission is to promote, among all people and nations, the highest possible level of mental health in its broadest biological, medical, educational, and social aspect. Consultative status at the United Nations provides WFMH a variety of opportunities to engage in mental health advocacy at the global level, working closely with the World Health Organization, UNESCO, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN Commission on Human Rights, the International Labor Organization and others. Visit: www.wfmh.com

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ⁱ ¹ The *Keeping Care Complete: Caregivers' Perspectives on Mental Health and Wellness* international telephone survey was conducted by independent market research company, Ipsos-Insight, in cooperation with All Global Ltd., on behalf of Eli Lilly and Company and the World Federation for Mental Health. Interviews were conducted from November 2005 to June 2006.