FOUR in 10 people living with bipolar disorder or schizophrenia in Ireland believe their mental illness had a highly negative impact on their lives, according to a recent survey.

The ‘Thinking Ahead’ survey found that 45% of those surveyed had to stop working or studying as a result of their illness. It also showed that 80% of people living with mental illness believed that the general public did not understand mental illness or what it is like to live with a mental condition.

These results compare favourably to the rest of the world where on average almost half (46%) feel their mental condition had a negative impact on their quality of life. Ireland was slightly below the average at 37%.

‘Thinking Ahead’ is a survey on living with mental illness in Ireland which was conducted by Schizophrenia Ireland on behalf of the World Federation of Mental Health. The research was funded by an unconditional grant from AstraZeneca. The results were published recently to coincide with World Mental Health Day.

This survey is the Irish arm of a worldwide survey that interviewed people living with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia to better understand how their mental illness impacts on their lives and the lives of their families. The survey also assessed how treatment can help and what support service users require to ensure their mental illness has as limited impact as possible on their quality of life.

All of the responders had been on medication at one time or another and the majority (72%) were satisfied with their medication. However, 79% of those surveyed felt that their medication could be improved upon, with a decrease in side effects being the most popular attribute that would lead to an improvement in satisfaction with their medication.

The most common types of medication being used by respondents include clozapine 23%, olanzapine 21%, risperidone 17%, lithium 12% and sodium valproate 10%.

The majority of those on medication said they had established some form of programmed habit to help them to remember to take it. Most said they took their medication at the same time every day, with the key times being ‘before bed’ and ‘just before breakfast’.

The ‘Thinking Ahead’ survey substantiates previous research carried out with service users, including ‘Talking About Choice’, a study published by Schizophrenia Ireland in July where 90% of the people surveyed were taking medication. ‘Talking About Choice’ emphasised the need for discussion around medication and especially the side effects caused by medication. The Talk About Choice survey concluded “that side effects could actually hinder return to, or continuation of, a ‘normal’ lifestyle and thus become an effect rather than a ‘side effect’.”

According to John Saunders, director of Schizophrenia Ireland: “Overall the main findings in ‘Thinking Ahead’ urgently indicate the need for radical change in attitude and behaviour on the part of mental healthcare service providers, professionals working within the services, the media and the general public at large.”

One of the main findings of the survey he pointed to is that people with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder in Ireland feel that there is an over-reliance and almost total dependence on medication in the mental healthcare services, to the detriment of other forms of intervention such as psychology and social work.

More than eight in 10 of the respondents were attending a psychiatrist. Half were attending a general practitioner and just over a quarter were attending a nurse practitioner. Those with anxiety disorder were a little more likely than average to attend a GP in addition to their psychiatrist. The use of nurse practitioners was fairly evenly spread across the various types of mental illness, though was slightly higher for those with anxiety disorder.

The survey also highlighted the severity of the social consequences of having a mental illness. People specifically referred to job loss and diminution in career prospects.

“This is reinforced by the fact that a very small percentage of people, 22%, with a severe mental illness continue in regular open employment with a very large number, up to 80%, being dependent on social welfare systems,” said Mr Saunders.

The Thinking Ahead theme was chosen to highlight the need for long-term strategies to treat and manage bipolar disorder and schizophrenia to ensure that patients achieve full quality of life benefits, as opposed to short-term solutions that only add to the stigma and mismanagement of mental illness.

The full results of the survey are available on the Schizophrenia Ireland website, www.schizophreniaireland.ie

- Tara Horan

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