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CLOSE TO HOME

## Money, political will needed to fix mental health 'system'

By ARTHUR W. EWART

Several editorials and a June 2 Close to Home by Dr. Dick Kirk have asserted that the mental health "system" is broken. This prompts me to ask, "What is the 'system' and was it ever 'fixed'?"

In fact, the "system" is a combination of public and private approaches to mental illness treatment -- sharply delineated by seriousness of diagnosis and, importantly, by private insurance or state funding.

This "system" has inherent shortcomings, as follows:

Private health insurance companies do not readily cover the expensive treatment of mental illness. Not surprising, given that comprehensive treatment of a seriously mentally ill person can easily cost \$20,000 per year. Not until Congress passes legislation mandating mental health coverage on par with physical health insurance will we come closer to a "fixed" system. Without this, the private sector will always lack the necessary resources.

Studies by California's Department of Mental Health have determined that the public sector mental health system is underfunded by 55 percent. This is a sad state of affairs when you consider that serious mental illness is the only major, catastrophic illness in the United States that is almost entirely delegated to the public sector for treatment. If you have cancer, diabetes or serious heart disease, you call your doctor -- not the county.

Proposition 63, the Mental Health Services Act, created a 1 percent income tax on millionaires to fund public mental health treatment. This new and welcomed revenue will only amount to an approximately 15 percent increase in county mental health budgets. Don't get me wrong. Every penny is appreciated, but Proposition 63 will not fix public mental health.

By legislative mandate, public sector programs serve the most seriously ill and those who are indigent. For individuals seeking private care, access will be limited by the breadth of insurance coverage. In this situation, county mental health is still the available safety net.

Locally, a person or family with a serious emergency can be seen at Mental Health Services' Psychiatric Emergency, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. While there are no plans to close this facility, it is true that the Sutter Inpatient Psychiatric Unit, operated by county staff, is closing this month.

A declining census, poor reimbursements and multi-million dollar losses over the last four years prompted the county to make this closure.

The declining census has resulted from new and successful community-based treatment programs. Still, plans are under way for an alternative inpatient unit for adults to be opened this year. It is our hope that this can be accomplished in the next three to six months.

It's not unusual for a community to lack psych inpatient beds. Consider that from Sonoma County north to the Oregon border there is only one adult inpatient unit (in Humboldt County) and no children's units.

In fact, only 28 of the 58 counties in the entire state have psych inpatient units, and a bare handful of these are publicly financed.

Published: Monday  
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Don't miss these cl

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In the meantime, Dr. Kirk's call to the community to "raise hell" about the status of the mental health system requires a thoughtful analysis of how mental health treatment is funded and delivered.

The current tax base for counties and the responsibilities for basic infrastructure leave few funds for mental health. The responsibility lies with the state for additional mental health dollars, which ultimately means increased taxes on both businesses and individuals.

Faced with this, I wish I was more confident about additional public support for this cause.

All too often when it comes to digging deeper for financial support of mental health treatment many people adopt the idea of the Rush Limbaugh show caller who once said, "I don't think the people should pay for that. I think government should pay."

The ability for some to separate government responsibility from citizen obligation never ceases to amaze me.

In reality, we all need to embrace this problem and take personal responsibility for fostering additional support -- both through parity legislation and increased state funding for mental health treatment.

This is money well spent. Treatment for mental illness works.

The vast majority of individuals receiving services are able to manage their symptoms and lead normal lives. And in case you haven't noticed these individuals are everywhere -- 25 percent of Americans in any given year suffer from a mental disorder. That's 58 million people nationally, or approximately 117,000 people in Sonoma County.

Most of us do not have to look far beyond our own families to know someone with mental illness. The cost of treatment is worth the value of your family.

Arthur W. Ewart is the Sonoma County Mental Health Services director.

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