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Death of Psychiatric Patient at New York Hospital Underscores Mental Health Care Crisis

ARLINGTON, Va.—The reported death of a woman at King’s County Hospital in Brooklyn, N.Y., illustrates the dire need for more public services for individuals with mental illness, according to the American Psychiatric Association.

According to news reports, a woman who was suffering from agitation and psychosis, was kept waiting in the emergency room for almost 24 hours because the hospital reportedly did not have a bed available for psychiatric patients. She collapsed onto the floor and then lay there for approximately one hour before emergency room personnel tried to revive her. Tragically, the woman died of causes that have yet to be determined.

“The question is how and why hospital personnel could ignore a person who fell to the floor in an emergency room and stood by or walked around her while she died,” said APA president Nada Stotland, M.D. “Still, the lack of emergency services for psychiatric patients is only one part of an overall health care crisis, which extends to and includes mental health services.”

Stotland pointed to a lack of state and community-centered mental health services that can intervene earlier, circumventing a crisis that would lead to the person seeking help at an emergency room that is ill-equipped to handle such crises. The fact is that most hospitals lose money on psychiatric services, and that may play a subtle role in how high a priority the hospital places on mental health cases.

“Incidents like this reflect a complete breakdown of the mental health system,” Stotland said. “There is little continuity of care, and there are few, inadequately funded outpatient services, resulting in repeated mental breakdowns, emergency room visits, and the need for hospitalization in the sickest individuals. Emergency rooms designed and staffed to treat patients with heart attacks and broken bones are faced with hundreds, sometimes thousands, of patients with critical psychiatric problems, often complicated by general medical disorders, homelessness, abuse and a lack of insurance coverage.”

A lack of funding has led to an ongoing shrinkage of the number of hospital beds for these individuals. At the same time, many times hospitals have no emergency room physician on duty that is qualified to handle mental health problems. The difficulty of accessing needed services may only intensify the sense of stigma many patients feel in seeking help for a psychiatric problem in the first place.

“The time to intervene is long before a person finds herself in the position of needing emergency help from a hospital that is ill-equipped to care for her,” Stotland said. “The tragedy is that we know how to help these individuals recover and remain productive members of society; this suffering is needless and ends up costing society as much or more than adequate care would cost. Our society is failing to provide the most basic safety net for our most vulnerable citizens.”

About the American Psychiatric Association:

The American Psychiatric Association is the nation’s leading medical specialty society whose more than 38,000 physician members specialize in diagnosis, treatment, prevention and research of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. Visit the APA at www.psych.org and www.HealthyMinds.org

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