

# Huge risk when sick stop using medication

KATE BENSON MEDICAL REPORTER  
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HALF of all people with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder who stop taking their medication will attempt suicide and 40 per cent will end up in prison, placing a huge emotional and financial burden on their families and society, an international study has found.

The study of more than 1800 psychiatrists and carers will be presented tomorrow at the Fifth World Congress on Mental Health and the Prevention of Mental and Behaviour Disorders, in Melbourne. It found that about 80 per cent of people with severe mental illness stop taking their medication at some point because they forget, cannot tolerate the drug's side effects or feel well.

About 50 per cent of people with psychotic illnesses have anosognosia, a condition where sufferers do not feel that they have an illness and do not see the need to be medicated. Almost all who do stop will relapse, resulting in a cascade of problems such as depression, erratic behaviour, hostility, mania, threats of suicide and self-harm, the study found. Most are admitted to hospital.

"That puts an enormous burden on carers and it is a situation which is only just beginning to be acknowledged," the executive director of the Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia, Margaret Springgay, said yesterday.

"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 psycho-social rehabilitation.

"The failure to have a holistic mental health service - linked to the broader life needs of people with mental illness - can see many people discharged into the community without the support needed to keep them well."

Ms Springgay said fewer than 20 per cent of Australians with severe mental illness were employed, compared to more than 50 per cent in most other OECD countries, adding to sufferers' feelings of isolation and stigma.

"Research has shown time and again that about 50 per cent of people with psychotic illness can be employed, but we have far too many on disability support pensions," she said, adding that mental health cost taxpayers more than \$2.7 billion a year.

The study, called Keeping Care Complete, also found that about 73 per cent of patients said they struggled to stay on their medication because of negative reports in the media about severe mental illness, while 87 per cent of psychiatrists believed that inaccurate portrayals in the media of people with schizophrenia and bipolar disorders negatively affected their patients.

"We may have moved away from institutions but we haven't really broken the shackles for people with major mental illness," said David Castle, a professor in psychiatry at the University of Melbourne.

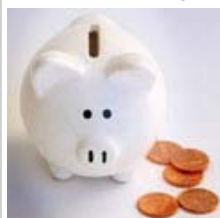
"Medication is not the complete answer but it must be seen as the key to keeping these people well ... there is a very, very high chance that people who stop taking their medication will end up in hospital."

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