

Forensic mental health

'Forensic' means related to or associated with legal issues. Forensic mental health refers to the services provided for the assessment and care of mentally disturbed offenders. Young men are over-represented in Australia's prison population, which explains why they are more likely than others to be referred to forensic mental health specialists or facilities. The mental state of some offenders, or alleged offenders, may need to be assessed for a variety of reasons, including:

- Whether or not they are capable of making a plea in court
- Their state of mind at the time of the offence
- Their current need for treatment.

People referred for assessment may have a range of problems, although mood disorder and psychotic illness are the most common reasons for referral. Treatment may be provided in the community or in prison, or the offender may require hospitalisation in a secure facility.

Mental illness

Mental illness is an umbrella term that refers to many different illnesses that affect the mind. Around one in five Australians will experience some form of mental illness - mild, moderate or severe - at some time in their lives. Mental illnesses can be divided into two main groups:

- **Non-psychotic illness** - symptoms include overwhelming feelings of sadness, tension or anxiety, and difficulties coping with everyday life. Phobias and obsessive compulsive disorders are examples of non-psychotic illnesses.
- **Psychotic illness** - symptoms include delusions, hallucinations and a distorted view of reality. Schizophrenia and bipolar disorder (manic depression) are examples of psychotic illnesses.

Mental disorders

Mental disorders that can have a negative impact on a person's interaction with the world include:

- **Organic brain disorders** - damage to brain tissue caused by diseases such as alcoholism or dementia.
- **Personality disorders** - these refer to enduring disturbances in the way in which a person interacts with others.
- **Intellectual disability** - caused by problems with brain development.

Types of patients

The type of person seen by forensic health professionals may include:

- Convicted offenders, who have been given a prison sentence and need secure hospital treatment.
- People who are accused of crimes, but are considered unfit to plead because of their mental disturbance.
- People who are considered not guilty of alleged crimes because of their mental impairment.
- Offenders or alleged offenders who are referred by courts for assessment or treatment.
- High risk offenders.
- Seriously mentally ill offenders living in the general community who are considered a potential threat to others.

Referral agencies

Offenders or alleged offenders may be referred to a forensic mental health practitioner for assessment of their mental state and competence by a number of organisations, including:

- The police
- The courts
- The prison
- Other justice and mental health services.

Treatment options

Treatment options for mentally ill offenders may include:

- **Medication** - such as antidepressants, antipsychotics and drugs to control some of the symptoms of particular psychiatric disorders.
- **Counselling** - one-on-one or group therapy.
- **Rehabilitation** - involvement in a program directed at returning offenders safely back into the community.

Helping the disadvantaged

There are services available to support mentally ill offenders and help them to manage their lives outside the institutional settings of the prison or hospital. The Mental Health Program in Victoria is funded by the Department of Human Services and funds a range of assistance.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Justice system
- Forensic mental health specialist.

Things to remember

- Forensic mental health refers to services involved in the assessment and care of mentally disturbed offenders.
- Young men are more likely than others to be referred to forensic mental health specialists.
- There are services for mentally ill offenders to help them better manage their lives outside of institutional settings.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health - Rural and Regional Health and Aged Care Services

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