

**June, 2008**  
**News Alert Number 1**

**Research Shows Mental Health Clients Die Early – More Questions Than Answers**

Dear CNMHC Member:

This is the first in a series of News Alerts on critical topics and key resources that we hope will be helpful and informative.

Today's news alert discusses the life span of mental health clients, which has been shown to be, on average, twenty-five years shorter than that of other Americans. First, a news story is presented from the online version of the journal *USA Today*, based on a 2007 research study funded by the U.S. Public Health Service and the National Institutes for Mental Health. It relates to the reduced life expectancy of those with serious mental health conditions. Then, a story about a specific research project involving life expectancy is examined. The research is a collaborative project of the University of California at San Diego and San Diego County Health and Human Services. It expresses an alternative point of view by assuming that treatments will inevitably increase the life span of those with mental illness, and that, as a result of the exploding population of elderly mental health clients, new and more effective approaches for treating older adults will be essential.

In "Mentally Ill Die 25 Years Earlier, On Average," a story from USA Today Online, Marilyn Elias contends, "People with serious mental illness die at age 51, on average, compared with age 76 for Americans overall." She continues, "[The gap has] widened since the early '90s when major mental disorders cut life spans by 10 to 15 years." Elias discusses potential reasons for the shortened life span of those with serious mental health conditions. She begins with mental health treatment: "In 2003, the FDA added warnings for Zyprexa and other anti-psychotic drugs because they can increase the risk of diabetes and weight gain." The story goes on to cover the following topic headings, among others:

- Do drugs help or harm?
- Mom feels betrayed by doctors, FDA
- Adult antipsychotics can worsen troubles
- A rush to overprescribe?

- An outraged journalist and father discovers the mental health system is in 'shambles'

Joseph Parks, a director of psychiatric services who is quoted in the article, says, “About 60% of the 10.3 million people with serious mental illness get care in public facilities, 90% as outpatients. ... They have illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression. Although the mentally ill have high accident and suicide rates, about 3 out of 5 die from mostly preventable diseases.” He concludes, “We're going in the wrong direction and have to change course.”

The USA Today story is available at the following URL:

[http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2007-05-03-mental-illness\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2007-05-03-mental-illness_N.htm)

While changing course may seem to be a top priority to some, others believe that new developments in evidence-based practice are likely to improve life expectancy to such a degree that the priority must be finding effective treatments for elderly mental health clients. According to a report about a collaborative study, *UCSD & County Mental Health to Collaborate on Intervention and Services Research for Older Adults with Psychotic Disorders*, adults suffering from psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia – a devastating, misunderstood and puzzling illness that dramatically alters an individual's thoughts, behavior and mood – are the focus of a unique collaborative program between the University of California, San Diego and the San Diego County Health and Human Services Department. Funded by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the research focuses on older people with psychosis. The story continues, “[T]he number of elderly Americans who suffer from a mental illness is projected to grow to approximately 15 million by 2030, compared to about 4 million reported in 1970.” At the same time, one researcher argues, “Younger adults who have a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, currently have a significantly shorter life span than those without mental illness.” He continues, “The average life span of these patients will increase, thanks to improved medication and other treatments.”

The story about the collaborative study can be accessed at the URL below:

[http://health.ucsd.edu/news/2002/11\\_18\\_Jeste.html](http://health.ucsd.edu/news/2002/11_18_Jeste.html)

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