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Relevance of Health-Literacy Models for People with Severe Mental Illness

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People with severe mental illness experience elevated levels of impairment, morbidity and health-risk behaviours compared with the general population. Despite this, it is consistently reported that they do not visit health professionals, including preventative health professionals, as regularly as the general population. Their poor health suggests that current health promotion efforts have been largely ineffective in addressing their specific needs. Barriers that might explain this include lack of motivation, expense and lack of access. Health literacy is also a potentially important factor. As a part of a programme of work to develop appropriate and effective health promotion for this group, we have explored existing health-literacy models and their relevance to marginalized populations, in particular, people experiencing severe mental illness. A comprehensive search of the literature was undertaken. Models of health literacy identified were analyzed to determine the source population, underpinning theory/frameworks, supporting research evidence and to consider their potential generalisability. This paper presents an analysis of existing health-literacy models in the context of severe mental illness. We propose that because existing models of health literacy were developed through consultation with people experiencing challenges to specific health and social issues, for example, cancer, low income and limited education, this raises questions as to the applicability of these models to people experiencing severe and ongoing mental illness. Whilst such individuals were not actively excluded in the development of the existing models, we propose the development of an alternative model which considers this population’s needs and limitations in accessing effective health-promotion campaigns/programs.