

Patient Advocates to Improve Access to Justice in Involuntary Hospitalisation

Authors : Zuzana Durajova, Natasa Diatkova, Shreya Bhardwaj

Abstract : This paper introduces the project START, its activities, goals, evaluation and final results. Over the past few decades, the legal discourse surrounding mental health has resulted in improvement in patient rights (in Netherlands, etc.), the appointment of Ombudspersons for psychiatric patients (in Austria, Sweden) and facilitating the participation of patients in decision-making processes. Czech legislation already recognizes the position of “patient’s advocate” as a person of trust. However, this instrument is not very widely known and rarely used in practice. In the pilot study of the project, legal training for patient advocacy is provided to persons with experience with mental health problems/psychiatric hospitalization chosen from a Czech-based NGO. These persons (patient advocates) visit patients in involuntary hospitalization in one closed ward in the chosen psychiatric institution. During visits, the patient advocates inform patients about their legal standing, their procedural rights and also offer them individual support in contacting their counsel, family members etc. To understand the effect of the intervention, qualitative interviews and participant observations are conducted with the patients, advocates, the hospital management and staff and other identifiable stakeholders, such as government officials responsible for mental health care reform. The interviews are held before, during and after the intervention (support from patient advocates in hospitals). Given the ethical quandaries arising from using psychiatric wards as a field setting, we assume a participatory approach to ensure respect for patient boundaries and dignity. Through this project, we seek to establish a profession of patient advocates based on professional standards.

Keywords : patient advocacy, involuntary hospitalization, Czech Republic, patient Rights, professionalization

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