

Stigma Impacts the Quality of Life of People Living with Diabetes Mellitus in Switzerland: Challenges for Social Work

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Abstract : Social work services offered to people living with diabetes tend to be moulded by the prevailing understanding that social work is to support people living with diabetes in their adherence to medical prescription and/or life style changes. As diabetes has been conceived as a condition facing no stigma, discrimination of people living with diabetes has not been considered. However, there is growing evidence of stigma. To our knowledge, nevertheless, there have been no comprehensive, in-depth studies of stigma and its impact. Against this background and challenging the present layout of services for people living with diabetes, the present study aimed to establish whether: -people living with diabetes in Switzerland experience stigma, and if so, in what context and to what extent; -experiencing stigma impacts the quality of life of those affected. It was hypothesized that stigma would impact on their quality of life. It was further hypothesized that low self-esteem, psychological distress, depression, and a lack of social support would be mediating factors. For data collection an anonymous paper-and-pencil self-administered questionnaire was used which drew on a qualitative elicitation study. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and structural equation modelling. To generate a large and diverse convenience sample the questionnaire was distributed to the readers of journal destined to diabetics living in Switzerland issued in German and French. The sample included 3347 people with type 1 and 2 diabetes, aged 16-96, living in diverse living conditions in the German- and French-speaking areas of Switzerland. Respondents reported experiences of discrimination in various contexts and stereotyping based on the belief that diabetics have a low work performance; are inefficient in the workplace; inferior; weak-willed in their ability to manage health-related issues; take advantage of their condition and are viewed as pitiful or sick people. Respondents who reported higher levels of perceived stigma reported higher levels of psychological distress ($\beta = .37$), more pronounced depressive symptoms ($\beta = .33$), and less social support ($\beta = -.22$). Higher psychological distress ($\beta = -.29$) and more pronounced depressive symptoms ($\beta = -.28$), in turn, predicted lower quality of life. These research findings challenge the prevailing understanding of social work services for people living with diabetes in Switzerland and beyond. They call for a less individualistic approach, the consideration of the social context service users are placed in their everyday life, and addressing stigma. So, social work could partner with people living with diabetes in order to fight against discrimination and stereotypes. This could include identifying and designing educational and public awareness strategies. In direct social work with people living with diabetes, this could include broaching experiences of stigma and modes of coping with. This study was carried out in collaboration with the Swiss Diabetes Association. The association accepted the challenging conclusions from this study. It connected to the results and is currently discussing the priorities and courses of action to be taken.

Keywords : diabetes, discrimination, quality of life, services, stigma

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