

Q & A Mindline



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Q Our son, who is 18, has extreme bouts of anger since he failed his exams three months ago. He is very anxious, negative and has discontinued contact with all. He stays in his room most of the day. He feels everyone is against him. At times he talks of ending his life but has never acted. We want him to see a psychiatrist but he refuses vehemently. How do we go about this? Can we get a prescription without him being seen and give him the medication mixed with food?

In my opinion, the above presentation is clearly underpinned by prejudice and stigma of mental illness which is deeply embedded, especially in our society. Stigma acts as a barrier in seeking mental health advice and support thereby delaying the treatment, the consequence of which is unnecessary and prolonged suffering and poorer quality of life. Not to forget, escalated risk of self harm and/or suicide.

Let me clarify some of the pertinent issues here. Doctors have fundamental

ethical and legal obligation in medicine to respect autonomous decision-making. Essentially, all individuals have a right to know what their problem is, and have the option of accepting or refusing treatment. In the eyes of the law, every individual is presumed to retain capacity to make decision (about their health and well-being) unless proven otherwise. This simply means that we must engage individuals with regards to treatment decision despite difficulties in disclosing diagnosis and outcome of illness - with or without treatment. Indeed, this is better done by a specialist rather than anxious and uninformed (in many cases) family members.

It is not right to presume that people with mental illness necessarily lose their ability to take decisions. Whilst some severe mental illnesses like schizophrenia (during active phase or in the later year of illness) may result in development of intellectual difficulties and require assistance in making decision. In such situations, every effort should be made to engage individual and their family with decisions pertaining to treatment options.

Covert administration of medication is a practice of concealing or disguising a person's medication such that he or she is unaware of its administration (for example medication being crushed and mixed with food or drinks). Such practice on an autonomous individual against his/her will is, both legally and ethically wrong and unacceptable.

Doubts may exist in a situation relating to non-autonomous individuals who are incapable (example due to severe enduring brain condition like dementia or severe mental retardation) of giving informed consent to receive or refuse medication per se. In these situations,

treatment without permission is allowed only if common law or other legal statute (such as mental health act) is applicable, and provides authority for detention and treatment. Such statutes have conditions that there is immediate risk to self or others due to a known or suspected severe mental illness. Herein medication may be prescribed and administered (even against persons wishes) in person's best interest or clinical necessity for limited period, until he/she becomes capable of making decisions. Nevertheless, medicine is not concealed in food but given orally or through injection, with families being fully engaged and informed.

With the information provided I think your son may be suffering from clinical depression of severe degree with psychosis (loss of touch with reality). Of course we need to examine him and rule out any underlying medical causes of his presentation. Remember, severe depression has higher risk of suicide. I suggest you sit down and talk to him about problems you see him facing and rationalise a way forward. Perhaps he would consider a health check that can be combined with psychiatric evaluation.

He must be seen as soon as possible voluntarily, and if he completely refuses then consider taking him to hospital under legal order from a magistrate, so that he may receive necessary treatment in order to minimise risk of self harm, suicide and prevent further deterioration of his mental health. Remember, life is precious and all mental ailments are treatable.

*Ask your queries at
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