A review of instruments developed to measure outcomes for carers of people with mental health problems


Objective: Community-based care for mental disorders places considerable burden on families and carers. Measuring their experiences has become a priority, but there is no consensus on appropriate instruments. We aimed to review instruments carers consider relevant to their needs and assess evidence for their use.

Method: A literature search was conducted for outcome measures used with mental health carers. Identified instruments were assessed for their relevance to the outcomes identified by carers and their psychometric properties.

Results: Three hundred and ninety two published articles referring to 241 outcome measures were identified, 64 of which were eligible for review (used in three or more studies). Twenty-six instruments had good psychometric properties; they measured (i) carers' well-being, (ii) the experience of caregiving and (iii) carers' needs for professional support.

Conclusion: Measures exist which have been used to assess the most salient aspects of carer outcome in mental health. All require further work to establish their psychometric properties fully.

Summations

- Carer outcomes can be measured in three domains: carers' well-being, their experience of caregiving and carers' needs for professional support.
- Candidate instruments with some published psychometric data are available for each of these areas; the choice of instrument depends on both the question and the subjects.
- Carer outcomes should be a routine component of mental health service evaluations.

Considerations

- Our review was limited to English language publications and two main databases.
- There may be published psychometric data on some measures which we failed to identify.
- The consultation exercise was unable to include all potential carer groups (e.g. very young carers, some minority ethnic groups).

Introduction

The last 50 years has witnessed a worldwide reduction in in-patient care for mental illness with the closure of mental hospitals and the shift in focus to the community (1, 2). While there is considerable evidence of the development of a range of community mental health services (3) to replace institutional care, much of the care received by patients is from informal carers who have shouldered a substantial part of the burden (4). These families, partners and friends may often