



December 11, 2017

<http://thehill.com/opinion/healthcare/364166-we-need-to-do-more-than-just-talk-about-mental-illness>

UMV: 68,900

We need to do more than just talk about mental illness

BY DR. HERBERT PARDES, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 12/10/17 12:40 PM EST
THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CONTRIBUTORS ARE THEIR OWN AND NOT THE VIEW OF THE HILL

55 COMMENTS



© Getty Images

There was a time when no one talked about mental illness. But, today, every tragic shooting is accompanied by calls for greater access to mental health treatment. The wheels of legislation turn slowly, but mental illness is a public health crisis that requires immediate attention to improve access to

care, raise awareness, and fund mental health research. In order to move the needle, we need real bipartisan leadership.

First, we have to separate facts from fiction. While many people erroneously believe that mental illness has a direct correlation to violence, the vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent. However, mental illness is a strong risk factor for suicide, accounting for 62 percent of all firearm deaths in the United States.

In fact, suicide has risen to the highest levels in more than 30 years. It is now the 10th leading cause of death among American adults and the second leading cause of death for young people ages 10 to 24. Suicide rates have risen for every age group, except older adults, and a recent study in the British Medical Journal found that incidents of self-harm among girls aged 13 to 16 increased by 68 percent over a four year period. We also continue to see an increase in psychiatric illnesses among veterans.

It is virtually impossible to calculate the human cost of these tragedies, but one study found that after factoring in underreporting, suicide and suicide attempts in 2013 cost an estimated \$93.5 billion nationally, primarily in lost productivity.

Psychiatric illness has also become one of the major conditions affecting the health of the world population. We are seeing a growing number of people suffering from anxiety and depression with other serious medical conditions or co-morbidities. The rising death toll from alcohol and opiate abuse has decimated families and entire communities.

Millions of people with serious mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, go untreated due to a persistent lack of psychiatrists and hospital beds. In many cases, people become homeless or incarcerated; our prison system has become the nation's largest caretaker of the mentally ill.

These issues are not someone else's problem. Mental illness affects one in five people, so it is quite likely that every single member of the House or Senate has a spouse, a child, a relative, or a friend who has been touched by mental illness.

Over the years, few major figures have had the clout to successfully press for mental health parity. There are, however, some advocates who stand out as important voices in the call for greater attention and support for programs for the mentally ill.

One example was the late Sen. Pete Domenici (R-N.M.), who took a leadership role in convincing Sen. Warren Rudman (R-N.H.) to recognize the issues of psychiatric patients, support mental health programs, and offer greater equity for those with psychiatric illness. As the father of a child with schizophrenia, Senator Domenici knew the issues first hand.

Rep. Tim Murphy (D-Conn.) made some progress through the Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act. With his departure from Congress, we are sorely in need of new champions for the mentally ill, humanitarians who care about the broad aspects of mental health and its impact on the community

It is heartening to see some members of the Senate and Congress step up. In early October, Sens. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) and Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.), and Reps. Leonard Lance (R-N.J.) and Doris Matsui (D-Calif.) introduced the Excellence in Mental Health and Addiction Treatment Expansion Act, a small (two-year, eight-state) initiative to expand access to community-based mental health and addiction care.

There are other small steps being taken, but we cannot wait to deal with the escalating mental health crisis in this country.

We know that people with mental illness respond to treatment. But in order to help the millions of Americans who are suffering, we need leaders who will come together to raise awareness, ensure access to care, and provide funding for scientists working to find better ways to diagnose, treat and cure mental illness.

Dr. Herbert Pardes is executive vice chairman of the NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital Board, and President of the Brain & Behavior Research Foundation's Scientific Council.