

Russell Ferstandig Discusses Addiction and the ACA

Psychiatrist Russell Ferstandig weighs in on what the Affordable Care Act means for those seeking substance abuse treatments.

Russell Ferstandig Reflects on Changes to Substance Abuse Treatment Under the ACA

Russell Ferstandig, a psychiatrist with a focus on addiction treatment, understands the challenges of the health care system. With millions of uninsured and underinsured Americans, getting the medical care they need can prove difficult. On top of that, not all insurance plans are equal. Depending on the provider and the amount that a person can afford, coverage differs.

With the implementation of President Obama's Affordable Care Act (ACA), however, this may all change. This plan aims to ensure that not only can more people afford insurance, but also that it meets stricter coverage requirements. Services that were not previously covered by some plans are now mandated. This includes substance abuse treatment. More people than ever will have the opportunity to seek care for the prevention and treatment of addiction.

How prevalent is substance abuse?

According to a survey by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), in 2009, 23.5 million Americans were in need of drug or alcohol abuse treatment. Unfortunately, only an estimated 2.6 million received help. Among the many factors that may have contributed to this include limited coverage of service by insurance, or lack of insurance all together.

Addiction exists in many different stages. The impact varies from person to person depending on the nature, severity and duration of their use. Receiving treatment early on can help to prevent more serious issues in the future and reduce the damaging effects. Having access to multiple forms of treatment, from prevention through recovery, could bring about beneficial changes.

How is coverage changing?

Under ACA regulations, people must either enroll in a marketplace insurance plan or a private plan that meets the same federal standards. All plans are mandated to cover what are deemed the 10 essential health benefits (EHBs). These services are:

1. Emergency services
2. Laboratory services
3. Pediatric services
4. Ambulatory patient services
5. Prescription drugs
6. Hospitalization
7. Mental health and substance use disorder services, including behavioral health
8. Preventive and wellness services
9. Rehabilitative and facilitative services
10. Maternity and newborn care

As far as mental health and substance abuse are concerned, this means that plans would cover services such as in-patient treatment, out-patient treatment, counseling, and psychotherapy. The exact services will depend on the state that person lives in and the plan that they select.

Previously plans were not required to cover these types of services. Those plans that already provided these services often only provided limited coverage. Anything not paid for by insurance, patients would have to pay out of pocket. This posed a challenge to some people who may have wanted to seek treatment, but were unsure how they would afford to do so. New insurance plans are designed to become more affordable and provide more comprehensive care. Many people may qualify for government subsidies to help lower plan costs.

Russell Ferstandig Takes a Closer Look at Addiction

Addiction is a topic that is sadly characterized by misinformation and misunderstanding. Psychiatrist Russell Ferstandig explains that overcoming addiction is a complex process because drugs and alcohol alter the way the brain functions. It requires more than just a strong will or desire to quit. Medical professionals now recognize addiction as a chronic disease that requires ongoing care. With the proper treatment, it is manageable. It also requires addressing comorbid psychiatric problems like depression and anxiety, plus therapy for new coping skills to deal with life's daily stressors and new and daily lifestyle behaviors changes.

How do drugs affect the brain?

Drugs change the way that nerves relay and process information. Sometimes it causes the release of excess dopamine, which elicits the feeling of pleasure. This dopamine release can help people perceive otherwise negative events and behaviors as positive. With time people begin to associate the feelings that occur with being intoxicated with feelings of pleasure. When this occurs many drug users and alcoholics actually start believing that the drugs and/or alcohol are producing a better and more pleasurable life, when the opposite is more realistic.

As their body builds up a tolerance, they need more of the drug to generate the same response they formerly obtained from a lower dose of the same drug.. The process underlying tolerance significantly alters how the brain works and leads to perceptual, belief and behavior changes that typically have a very negative impact on an individual's behaviors. It also frequently negatively impacts their physical health.

How is addiction treated?

Treatment varies from person to person. What is beneficial for one person may not work as well for the next. Oftentimes, comprehensive care that covers many aspects of the condition is necessary. Patients may engage in a combination of inpatient treatment, outpatient treatment, counseling, psychotherapy, support groups, medication, and more. It all depends on their individual needs and how they respond.

Detoxification is often the first step in treatment. In order to recover it is necessary to rid the body of the addictive substance. With substances that create severe withdrawal symptoms, it is also important to address some of most significant and uncomfortable symptoms that occur early in the withdrawal process. This often occurs under close medical supervision to make sure that the person is safe and to help them through the early phases of the withdrawal symptoms. Sometimes medication is used to provide relief and reduce cravings.

Therapy is something that many programs incorporate into treatment. It often includes individual, group, and/or family therapy sessions. This helps patients to identify the root causes behind their substance abuse and learn ways to better cope with these situations. They must learn to change their behavior and engage in more productive and healthier habits. By including family, they see can also see how their addiction has impacted those they love. Therapy can help to resolve family issues and improve overall dynamics and function.

Some patients receive therapy on an on-going basis. Even after they have completed inpatient or outpatient treatment, therapy may continue. It can also help those in the early stages of addiction to overcome their problems before they become more severe. Patients learn how to establish healthier routines and how to function without the use of drugs or alcohol. Support groups are another form of counseling that allows recovering addicts to connect with each other and share their experiences.

Addiction is a manageable disease, and with better access to treatment, more people may seek the help they need.

ABOUT:

Dr. Ferstandig is a board certified psychiatrist with more than 30 years of experience. His areas of practice focus on general psychiatry, behavioral and addiction medicine, and biofeedback. In addition to running his private practice, Russell Ferstandig also serves as the medical director and owner of Monmouth Behavioral Medicine Center in Manasquan, NJ; Russell Ferstandig, M.D., LLC in Toms River, NJ; and president of Mobius Research.

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