

British mental health services accused of racism

British South Asians suffering from depression and other mental health problems are missing out on treatment because of 'institutional racism' in the state health service, a senior health executive has charged.

Antony Sheehan, chief executive of the Leicestershire National Health Service Trust, said Monday women of South Asian origin in Britain are twice as likely to commit suicide as the rest of the population.

'We really should acknowledge the impact of institutional racism in mental health and wider health and social care services, in the same way as it is recognised in the criminal justice system. The real issue is just how we've chosen not to connect with these communities,' Sheehan said.

His comments came as the government's first national report on the self-reported experience of patients in black and minority ethnic groups showed that discrimination continued to afflict the delivery of mental health services to non-whites in Britain.

The report says South Asians tend to be secretive about their mental health issues, with many refusing to acknowledge that they or their relatives may be mentally ill for fear of racism or social stigma.

Keeping it under covers for a long period can make matters worse and medical help in later stages can be less or not useful at all.

Sheehan's comments were backed up by Lord Kamlesh Patel, chairman of the Mental Health Act Commission, who warned the 'hidden plague' would spread if the problems were not tackled urgently.

Patel, a distinguished academic, said greater efforts have to be made to offer support to Asian communities, or they could suffer similar levels of problems to black African and Caribbean groups, which are vastly over-represented in mental health institutions.

People from these ethnic groups are as much as 18 times more likely to end up in a mental institution than the national average, and Lord Patel said that the system must be alert to signs that people from Asian backgrounds are also experiencing problems.

'If we ignore these messages then in the next 10 to 20 years we're quite likely - or very likely - to see the same numbers of South Asian people ending up in the mental health system as young black African and Caribbean people are doing now,' he told the BBC.

'That's completely unacceptable in the 21st century.'

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