



Rx: Health Care FYI #55

Subject: *Avoid Future Campus Tragedies: Helping Students with Mental Illness*

From: *Rep. Tim Murphy (PA-18)*

Date: *May 1, 2007*

The problem: When dependent students over the age of 18 are exhibiting signs of mental illness, schools (high school and college) are often hesitant to report this information to parents. Without this information, parents are unable to participate in getting the student help, provide medical history, or follow-up with treatment. As a result, young adults may not get the help they need.

What is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA)?

- The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974 was originally intended to protect the confidentiality of student grades and records. Exceptions for release of records can be made “in connection with an emergency, [to] appropriate persons if the knowledge of such information is necessary to protect the health or safety of the student or others.” However, an unintended consequence of this law is that it creates a communication barrier where schools withhold information from parents. A further consequence is that school personnel, administrators, and teachers who have little or no training in mental health/mental illness are burdened with defining and determining if a student is at risk.

Many young adults experience symptoms of mental illness:

- A 2006 survey by the American College Health Association reports that nearly 15% of those in college are diagnosed with depression. One in four adults experience symptoms of mental illness in their lifetime according to the National Institute of Mental Health.
- The American College Health Association reported in a 2005 survey of college students that 11% of women and 9% of men considered suicide. According to a study by the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students.
- Many youth and young adults with mental illness are exposed to bullying, harassment, maltreatment and social alienation by other students and adults, which can exacerbate their condition.

- A 2006 survey conducted by the American College Counseling Association found that about 40 percent of counseling-center clients had severe psychological problems, including 8 percent with disorders so serious they could not remain in school.
- According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice, in 2003 of 7.7 million U.S. college students, 526,000 experienced violent crimes (rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault). A significant percentage of students involved in violent crime may also have symptoms of a diagnosable mental illness.
- Years of research findings have concluded that mental health services provided by properly trained professionals can be effective in the treatment of mental illness. Withholding referrals and treatment, however, can be detrimental to patients' recovery and prognosis.

Privacy must work with common sense to protect students on campus:

- Confidentiality is the cornerstone of the doctor-patient relationship. However, when information reveals a significant risk to the student or other students' health or safety (including suicide, homicide, or physical assault) then it may serve the best interest of the student to inform those who can provide help that protects the student and others.
- Mental health professionals have the authority and the obligation to waive confidentiality to save a patient's life or prevent crimes.
- Parents and legal guardians of a student may be in the best position to provide essential help to a student suffering from significant mental illness by providing emotional support, medical history, coordinating care with various mental health and medical professionals, and long term follow-up.

Recommendations:

- Support the Mental Health Security for America's Families in Education (SAFE) Act to clarify the circumstances under FERPA where colleges and universities can release information to parents of dependent students who are at risk for suicide, homicide or physical assault. It is essential that laws should be aimed towards facilitating not inhibiting parent-child communication that aids treatment for mental illness.