The Million Hearts™ Initiative
Why Psychosocial Nurses Should Care

Last fall the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services organized the Million Hearts™ initiative (http://millionhearts.hhs.gov/index.html), aimed at preventing 1 million heart attacks and strokes over the next 5 years by implementing ABCS: Appropriate aspirin therapy, Blood pressure control, Cholesterol management, and Smoking cessation.

WHY SHOULD NURSES CARE?
Clearly, nurses, including psychosocial nurses, should be aware that cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. Two million heart attacks and strokes occur in the United States each year (Frieden & Berwick, 2011), and cardiovascular disease causes one in three (approximately 800,000) deaths reported each year in the United States (Roger et al., 2011). According to Frieden and Berwick (2011), after a heart attack, a person may become less physically active, fatigued, and depressed. Heart attacks and strokes can be fatal and are a leading cause of disability (Frieden & Berwick, 2011).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PSYCHOSOCIAL NURSING PRACTICE?
While many nurses know that cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death for Americans, it may be surprising to see the disproportionate toll it has on people with substance use and mental disorders. In his blog post “Saving a million lives, one heart at a time,” Dr. Ron Manderscheid (2012) stated that one third of all deaths due to heart disease or stroke are experienced by people with behavioral health conditions—1 million deaths over 5 years. This is a staggering statistic! According to Manderscheid, Druss, and Freeman (2008), people with serious mental illnesses live, on average, 25 years less than the general population. Many of these premature deaths are due to risk factors that are controllable and even preventable, including smoking, obesity, hypertension, and high cholesterol.

Seventy-five percent of individuals with substance use and mental disorders smoke cigarettes, compared with 23% of the general population (Parks, Swendsen, Singer, & Foti, 2006). Smoking is a modifiable risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Smoking cessation programs and education are keys to reducing this number. Another risk factor is obesity. Many people with substance use and mental disorders are overweight or obese. Second-generation antipsychotic medications are highly associated with weight gain, diabetes, dyslipidemia, insulin resistance, and metabolic syndrome (Parks et al., 2006). Monitoring and tracking weight, body mass index, and waist circumference, while educating people about lifestyle choices including eating healthy and exercising regularly, are important steps to reducing heart attack and stroke risk. This is a key role and responsibility for nurses. In addition, nurses must help ensure people are having their blood pressure and cholesterol checked regularly and are mindful of the risk factors associated with atypical antipsychotic medications.
Nurses must hold true to their holistic roots; they can play an important role helping people live longer, healthier, more productive lives. To protect heart and brain health, it is important to apply a public health approach, promote coordination between mental and physical health care, advocate education, and support wellness and empowerment. Perhaps most important of all is joining forces with the individual to promote empowerment. By encouraging people to be empowered and take personal responsibility for their health, individuals will make healthier choices to promote their own wellness.

**SUMMARY**

The Million Hearts initiative is a good way to spread the word about cardiovascular health. It is an important initiative that will raise awareness, and nurses in the mental health community should be particularly interested in joining the campaign. Joining forces with Million Hearts will encourage nurses to identify individuals at cardiac risk, ensure they receive treatment for high blood pressure and cholesterol, promote healthy diet and exercise, and support smoke-free environments. Hopefully, this will reduce the number of heart attacks and strokes, as well as death, for people with mental illness.

**REFERENCES**


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