

## A survivor of a broken healthcare system

by J in California

I have been admitted, mistreated, and dumped by both UCLA and Cedar Sinai Medical Center for not having any insurance or way of paying for my treatment. I am now writing to you from a coffee shop as I am very sick, have nowhere to go to get shelter, and I am writing to ask for your help and immediate assistance with this matter. I am educated as a medical doctor and was a physician in training until 1999, when an invisible illness -- that I was unaware I had -- changed my life forever. I am currently severely disabled, homeless, and indigent with a mental illness. Ironically, it was my choice of profession and my work as a surgical resident at Stanford University that triggered my disease to a point where I was too unstable to finish my training as a surgeon.

I have been diagnosed with Circadian Rhythm Disorder and Bipolar II Disorder that creates a body clock disturbance that eventually leads to very severe mood swings -- from hypomania, which is an extremely euphoric hyper-functional state, to major depressions, where I can be catatonic and dysfunctional to a point where I barely have enough energy to battle my constant feelings of hopelessness and despair. My illness has both genetic and environmental components and, when left untreated, deteriorates rapidly with age. The medical profession tends to refer to the disease as analogous to diabetes, where it may be controlled if the proper medical regimen is found, compliant by the patient, and exogenous factors are avoided. In my particular case, in 2005, after being undiagnosed and untreated for so many years, (I had clear symptoms as far back as 1986 when I was 18 years of age) I could not provide for my daily needs anymore, and my brother and mother had to become voluntary caregivers, while the rest of my extended family became entrusted people in my life. However, through this trying time, I never lost decision-making capacity regarding my medical affairs and I always had continuity of care with my physician.

In 2007, after over 20 years of having symptoms of this devastating illness and being resistant to multiple drug therapies, a medication was finally discovered that pulled me out of a severe depression. This lasted over nine months; after this time I lived on my mother's bathroom floor. Coincidentally, at this particular time, my family could not care for me properly and my living situation became so unbearable that I ended up on the streets, penniless and eventually without health insurance as my social structure became non-existent. I initially attributed this fact to my family's lack of education and awareness of my illness; but this eventually led to a series of contentious incidents and actions that were intentional, malicious and despicable in nature and led to causing me grievous bodily harm. After a year of living on the streets, indigent and not able to obtain government benefits such as SSDI or SSI, I experienced mental anguish, humiliation and emotional pain from my family and a society that alienated me due to an unjust, misunderstood stigma. Unfortunately, my story is more common in society than I could have ever imagined. It is a world that I do not wish on any human being, and yet being indigent and homeless is only a fraction of the pain and suffering. The stigma of mental illness in our society is spiraling out of control and the victims are being portrayed as perpetrators, which is leading to disastrous consequences that unnecessarily lead to many harmful injuries and even deaths. These include innocent people being incarcerated, or involuntarily hospitalized without justification and eventually leading to multiple kinds of abuse from all aspects of society.

I unfortunately know of this first hand, as I am a survivor of a broken system and an under-educated society from which I so eagerly attempted to get adequate treatment.

Currently, I have been in and out of the hospitals as my illness is progressing chronically and in physical form. I am still not able to get government benefits due to the abuse that is continuing from family members, law enforcement, and hospital and social workers. There appears to be lack of education of dependent adult abuse even in the affluent and the professions that should understand this heinous crime the most. But the worst part of it is not the lack of understanding; it is the malicious nature of how people prey on the weak and vulnerable. I may be unfortunate for the many hardships that occurred in my life, but I am fortunate to have the education, intelligence, tenacity, and the many loving people who have helped me survive to become a voice and an advocate for the many vulnerable people who share my illness or similar hardships, yet do not have the resources that I mentioned above.