

# Who are Bournemouth's patients?

Over the years, people have asked what we do at Bournemouth Hospital. We wanted to take this opportunity to introduce our patients, and explain how they get admitted to our facility and why

## GUEST COMMENTARY

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they are here.

The fact is that patients at Bournemouth Hospital could be your neighbors, your friends or even your family. Mental illness doesn't discriminate. It affects people of all socioeconomic classes, regardless of their gender or education level, and can strike at any age, affecting children, adults and the elderly. A recent study in the June 2005 issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that the prevalence of mental disorders at any given moment is 30.5 percent of the population in the United States, although only one-third of this number receives treatment. Left untreated, mental disorders do not usually disappear, but can manifest more severe symptoms, often requiring admission to a private psychiatric hospital or a psychiatric unit of a general hospital. The state, through the Department of Mental Health, now provides mostly long-term treatment for chronically ill psychiatric patients, whereas the private sector provides virtually all of the care of the acutely ill patients.

Many people in Eastern Massachusetts who seek help for mental illness will be referred to Bournemouth Hospital. Bournemouth has operated as a psychiatric facility on this site since 1895, and many of our abutters dwell on land previously owned by the hospital. Our mission is to provide a comprehensive continuum of care for those affected by acute mental disorders.

Some of the most common diagnoses that Bournemouth treats include depression, bipolar disease, schizophrenia, alcohol and drug dependency and dual diag-

nosis. All patients are treated in locked units. New outdoor enclosed areas also permit us to provide fresh air to patients within a secure setting. Bournemouth's treatment approach is to offer psychiatric medications, and individual and group counseling. All major insurers and HMOs have elected to contract with Bournemouth Hospital. We also provide free care.

In today's managed-care environment, it is actually very difficult to get admitted to a psychiatric facility. Nonetheless, Bournemouth has typically operated at more than 90 percent or higher occupancy over the past several years. The average

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length of stay has dropped, however, going from 16 days in 1994 to seven days in 2004, while admissions have increased from 1,800 to 3,600 per year in this same time. The number of licensed beds has not changed.

Patients are referred to psychiatric hospitals such as Bournemouth through several channels, including local emergency rooms, crisis centers, HMOs, primary care physicians and from mental health professionals. On rare occasions, patients themselves may also request admission, but need to have approval from their insurance provider or HMO. Patients must be in acute emotional crisis, or must be unable to care for themselves due to mental illness, in order to qualify for admission.

People who sign papers agreeing to be admitted are considered voluntary patients. Those who are admitted against their will for evaluation and treatment are considered involuntary patients. Involuntary patients have three

days to agree to sign in voluntarily. If they refuse, Bournemouth Hospital is obliged to discharge the patients to the community if they are not considered an imminent life-threatening risk to themselves or others, even though they may still be mentally ill. If, however, they are considered to pose such a threat, Bournemouth Hospital will petition the court to have the patients committed. The final decision will be that of the district court judge.

When patients sign into a facility such as Bournemouth voluntarily, they do not give up their civil rights in the process. This means that they are free to leave at any time as long as they aren't a danger to anyone. When patients whom Bournemouth considers a threat leave, the police are notified immediately. But when patients who pose no threat want to walk away, the law gives them the right to leave peacefully without being restrained. Voluntary patients may not be forced to stay without a good reason. It is important for neighbors to understand this fact, since it does not mean that Bournemouth is being lax when voluntary patients choose to leave, but rather indicates that we are respecting the legal rights of every individual who walks through our doors.

We also exercise this respect for human rights by providing treatment for patients who need it, even if they have an accompanying health concern or legal problem. Just as in a general hospital's emergency room where a patient suspected of a crime cannot be turned away, Bournemouth Hospital must also provide treatment of the mentally ill, regardless of their situation and background.

No one chooses to have mental illness. Like high blood pressure, cancer and heart disease, mental illness strikes the innocent. While we can't prevent this disease, we can be sure that we have good inpatient and outpatient treatment programs in place for those who need it.

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