

# A meeting of like minds

Although widely used in the United States and elsewhere, peer support for those with mental illness has seen little adoption in the UK. Now a programme based in Edinburgh aims to take it into the mainstream

## Jennifer Trueland

**Shaz Puri**, a former prison officer, was unable to work for years and even lost his home due to serious mental health problems. During this time, employment seemed like an impossible dream.

But now he is off benefits and has started work as one of Scotland's first peer support workers, based in Edinburgh's deprived Craigmillar area.

In this role, he will use his own story of mental illness and recovery to help people with problems. Formalised peer support is a relatively new concept in the UK, although it has been widely used in the United States and elsewhere. And the approach has garnered high-level support in Scotland.

It is the subject of one of the key commitments in the Scottish Executive's strategy, *Delivering for Mental Health*, published at the end of last year. The commitment (one of 14 in the strategy) is to 'have in place a training programme for peer support workers by 2008 with peer support workers being employed in three board areas later that year'.

The plan is that these workers, all of whom will have had mental health problems and been

through extensive training, will be a new part of the mental health team and, crucially, will be paid as such, as these are not voluntary posts.

In Scotland, the momentum behind peer support has been building up for some time, led by, among others, Simon Bradstreet, director of the Scottish Recovery Network. He was attracted to the idea when he attended a leadership

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programme in New Zealand. Since then he has been almost evangelical about it and, it is fair to say, has been the driving force behind the policy in Scotland.

'It seemed to me a really good way to get recovery principles into practice,' he says. 'Formalised peer support isn't the same as having volunteers – it legitimises it by making the workers part of the team. By professionalising

them, we're saying we value them.'

He accepts that some other mental health workers might feel threatened by the new role, but adds: 'I think it will be welcomed by nurse managers looking at ways of promoting recovery principles in line with the review of mental health nursing.'

Since the strategy was published, activity in the field has gathered pace, both nationally and locally. For example, the first training course was held in December 2006, while a national conference was held in February to consider how the role should be developed and advanced.

Alex McMahon, mental health nursing advisor and head of the mental health delivery and services unit in the Scottish Executive, says: 'The concept of recovery is one which we want mainstreamed into mental health services and into the minds of the general population. Alongside the concept, we also need to work with and employ individuals who have had lived experiences of mental illness.'

'One such approach is through the development of peer support workers who can use their experience both of mental illness as well as knowledge of mental health services and systems.'

## The Craigmillar project

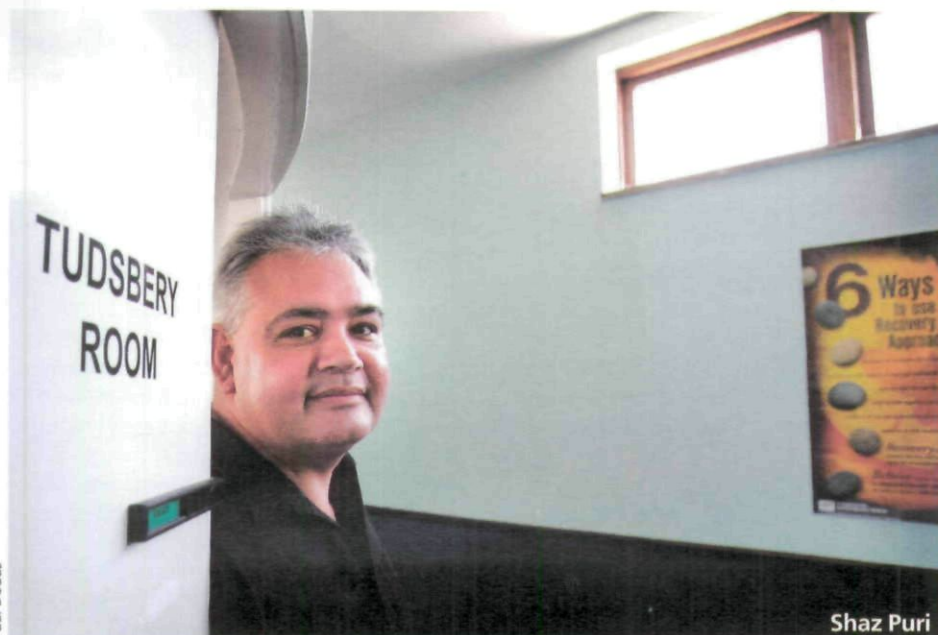
The Craigmillar peer support project, which employs Mr Puri, is run by the leading voluntary organisation, Penumbra, in conjunction with NHS Lothian and the Scottish Recovery Network, with funding from the Scottish Executive. Called *Plan 2 Change*, it was already in development when the *Delivery for Mental Health* strategy was published and is now taking its first referrals.

The four peer support workers – one full-time and three part-time – were among 20 people who completed a training programme run by the American organisation META.

In this particular project, the team will work with patients, referred by Craigmillar Medical Centre, who are at risk of developing serious mental illness or who have lifestyle issues. It's a 'softly-softly' beginning to an approach that could eventually see peer support workers based in a number of acute and community settings and working with people in a range of circumstances.

Dick Fitzpatrick, projects manager for NHS Lothian's mental health strategic programme, stresses that the new members of staff are expected to add value, not take over any other role. 'Peer support workers are an addition, not a replacement in any shape or form,' he says.

Mr Puri, who is 48, says, 'My support worker suggested I apply for the course and I found it very inspiring. I think peer support workers can make a real difference. I've had severe mental health problems and I have found it frustrating when psychiatrists and others have said to me they understand what I'm going through, when they don't. Now I'll be able to tell people what happened to me and also share with them what worked for me – maybe it will work for them too.' ■



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Shaz Puri

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