

## **IMPULSE booklet 'let's work together'**

### **Review**

This is a really useful, and ground breaking information booklet for mental health service users, their families, friends, clinicians and other interested people. The user involvement in mental health movement is well-established in Western Europe, and the authors of the booklet are keen to develop user involvement in the newer democracies of South Eastern Europe (SEE), where most health services are still predicated on a top-down, hierarchical approach whereby clinicians are the experts and service users and carers have very little voice.

The concept that service users and carers possess their own, unique expertise can be challenging to traditional, socio-cultural practices and assumptions, but this booklet demonstrates very clearly how the involvement of service users and carers, and an acknowledgement of their experiences, can be of huge benefit, socially, economically and psychologically to all.

Experts by experience (EBEs) can together address the very real issues of stigma, discrimination and stereotyping that inform attitudes towards mental health service users. By developing a user movement, service users can become empowered, gain agency and seize the initiative in terms of helping to shape the future of mental health services, especially as these shift from hospital confinement into community-based care.

Mental health services are often described as 'Cinderella' services because they are typically under resourced, are not widely seen as attractive career options for clinicians and are easily marginalised. The history of user-led organisations in countries such as the UK over the previous 30 years, shows that despite widespread scepticism and dismissive attitudes, not least from clinicians and other professionals, service users, carers and experts by experience are now highly valued and respected. In the field of mental health research, studies must involve service users at all stages of the study from inception through to final dissemination and publication. Service users sit on the boards of mental health trusts and have a strong voice in informing policy developments, strategic direction and the appointment of key personnel. Achieving this has been a long and sometimes painful road, but it has been critical in improving the quality of, and funding for, mental health services in the UK.

The IMPULSE booklet sets all of this out very clearly and thoughtfully for a wide readership, from service users to mental health professionals. It describes the current situation of newly formed user groups in the SEE; it shares their experience as authors and EBES; and it raises awareness of the potential for user groups and what they can achieve for mental health services in the region.

The IMPULSE booklet presents a very powerful case for developing user led organisations (ULOs) in the SEE, not least in terms of advocating for networking and collaboration between the SEE and countries which already have well-established ULOs. It works on multiple levels, as an advocacy document, a tool box for those who want to establish their own ULO, and as a resource for those who want to know more. This is an exciting moment

for mental health services and service users in the SEE, and I wish them the very best of luck.

Dr Susan Collinson

Chair of LEAP (lived advisory group)