Mental health — and how the other half lives

Sir, Over the past 40 years the UK has led the way in the development of specialist mental health services for older people. Mental illness affects about 10 per cent of older people and we are concerned that the UK is beginning to dismantle these services and move the care of older people with mental illness into “ageless” (or age-inclusive or age-blind) services, where an 18-year-old and 80-year-old may be treated in the same service. A recent survey found that around 10 per cent of respondents had already undergone significant merger into ageless adult services and a similar number reported this was imminent.

The reasons for this change are unclear — it may simply be an attempt to save money — but there is no evidence to support the move to age inclusive mental health services. In fact a recent survey showed ageless services are detrimental to patient care.

Old-age mental health services are not just about managing dementia — around 40 per cent of patients in older adults services have illnesses other than dementia (such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety). We therefore believe that specialism of old-age psychiatry — with a specifically trained, skilled workforce for older people with mental illness — should be the vehicle for the provision of age-appropriate non-discriminatory services to all our older population.

We call upon health providers in the UK to halt to the development of “ageless” mental health services, and ensure old-age services are protected.

Signed by:

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