MHH project: Successful return to work after mental illness

Department of Psychiatry and cooperation partners receive 4.3 million euros from the Innovation Fund of the Joint Federal Committee

Mental disorders are the second most common cause of incapacity for work. After many years of severe mental illness, many of those affected lose their jobs. A significant proportion of them take early retirement. This is where the project "Intensified Return to Work – Aftercare in Psychiatric Outpatient Clinics of Health Care Clinics (RTW-PIA)" comes in. In this project, the Department of Psychiatry, Social Psychiatry and Psychotherapy of the Hannover Medical School (MHH), together with other institutions, is investigating how longer periods of absence and the risk of reduced earning capacity can be reduced with better relapse prevention. The project is funded with 4.3 million euros from the innovation fund of the Joint Federal Committee and is scientifically accompanied.

Support after returning to work

"Incapacity to work is not only a major problem for the individual affected and their families, it is also a major challenge for society and the national economy," says Professor Dr. Gregor Szycik from the Department of Psychiatry, Social Psychiatry and Psychotherapy. He heads the RTW-PIA project. So far, research has mainly focused on the period until mentally ill people return to work and less on the time afterwards. This is to change with the new study. "The study participants will be intensively accompanied during their return to work," explains Professor Dr Stefan Bleich, director of the clinic and deputy project leader. Not only experts from psychiatry, occupational therapy and social work, but also responsible persons from the companies are involved in the comprehensive aftercare. "If conflicts arise in the workplace, they can be recognised and resolved at an early stage," explains Professor Bleich.

Analogue and digital measures

Five care clinics are involved in RTW-PIA. The study involves 253 people each in the intervention and control groups. The after-care concept consists of a combination of personal individual and group therapy measures as well as internet-based components. A homepage is planned for this, on which the patients are to solve tasks, for example. The project started at the beginning of this year. Professor Szycik hopes that the first patients can be included next autumn.

Nationwide standard would be "a milestone"

The funding of 4.3 million euros from the innovation fund of the Joint Federal Committee refers to the project duration of four years. The innovation fund is a tool for promoting and researching so-called new forms of care. If RTW-PIA is successful, it is to be included in the standard care of the statutory health insurance funds. This means that it would be available to all patients with statutory health insurance throughout Germany. "That would be a milestone in the treatment of mentally ill people," says Professor Dr. Szycik.
Cooperation with six partners

The MHH Department of Psychiatry is leading the project. It is working with the following cooperation partners: Asklepios Klinikum Harburg, Burghof-Klinik GmbH & Co. KG, Rinteln, Klinik Wittgenstein, Bad Berleburg, Alexianer St. Joseph-Krankenhaus Berlin Weißensee GmbH, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg and Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin, Dortmund.