Mental health 2.0

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(Medical Xpress) -- The internet and new media could play a vital role in the delivery of mental health care, according to a series of research papers published in the *Journal of Mental Health*.

Professor Til Wykes, Vice-Dean for Research at King's College London's Institute of Psychiatry, and editor of the Journal of Mental Health says: 'There is huge potential for digital technologies to help us improve access to [mental health care](link). There are still barriers to overcome such as how do we increase adherence to e-therapies and how we can overcome the digital divide. The field is still in its infancy, but the different ways in which we could use the technology for patient benefit are hugely exciting.'

Dr. Paul Wicks, honorary research worker at King's College London's Institute of Psychiatry and Director of R&D at PatientsLikeMe.com says: 'Any smartphone today is more powerful than the best home

computer of a decade ago. Although more people than ever before have access to mental health tools, apps, and games wherever they may be and at a pace they control, there is wide variation in quality. This special issue showcases some of the best e-mental health interventions from the academic field as this new medium reaches maturity.'

E-mental health is the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), particular the internet and new media, to support and improve mental health conditions and care. The opportunities offered by digital technologies and the internet could help address some of the most difficult problems faced by mental health services including delivery costs, limited clinical workforce, access to services and continuity of care.

The digital divide in mental health

A survey of 121 people from community mental health services found that technology use and access were very similar to that of the general population with older people reporting less familiarity, access and confidence across a range of technologies. Black, minority and ethnic (BME) groups were more likely to access computers outside of their own homes than white individuals, highlighting the importance of ensuring service users have sufficient privacy to access online services. The survey found no evidence of a lack of interest in ICT, with older participants experiencing psychosis indicating a desire to use computers more frequently.

Therapeutic gaming and biofeedback

Preliminary data from the Playmancer trials shows that therapeutic video games for people with impulse control disorders (such as gambling) may help them develop better coping strategies for negative emotions and

stressful situations. The game combines the use of different scenarios with real-time monitoring of physiological and emotional reactions and biofeedback in order to improve participants' impulse control, emotional regulation and problem solving skills.

Self-monitoring and computerised feedback

The software Web-Akquasi, has been piloted in a number of [mental health](#) evaluation settings. The programme sends email reminders to patients at regular intervals with an option to enter data via a mobile device. The information is then fed back to help clinicians to monitor patients' progress, provide additional support when required and ultimately improve and adapt treatment plans to the individual.

Promoting early intervention in eating disorders

A substantial proportion of people suffering from eating disorders seek help late or many never access treatment. From a survey of 238 individuals who used an online service for eating disorders (counselling emails and online forum), more than half (57.3%) reported that this was the first time they had access professional help – over 50% of these had engaged with other forms of support after using the online service. The findings suggest that a low-intensity, easily accessible service such as this can facilitate access to routine care.

Understanding online drug forum communities

New recreational drugs are constantly emerging, often rendering professional literature either late or out of date. Drug-related internet forums on the other hand include educated users with technical and pharmacological knowledge. The qualitative study of 8 English language internet forums reveals strong, unified and unique communities of drug

users. Understanding these communities may help provide insight into compounds consumed and methods of administration in order to better inform policy, clinical knowledge, treatment and preventative approaches.

More information:

Papers in this issue include:

• Schmidt, U. et al. 'E-mental health: a land of unlimited possibilities', *Journal of Mental Health*, August 2012

• Wicks, P. 'E-mental health: a medium reaches maturity', *Journal of Mental Health*, August 2012

• Kelly, J. et al. 'Intelligent real-time therapy: Harnessing the power if machine learning to optimize the delivery of momentary cognitive-behavioral interventions', *Journal of Mental Health*, August 2012

• Russell, G. et al. 'The impact of social anxiety on student learning and well-being in higher education', *Journal of Mental Health*, August 2012

• Moessner, M. et al. 'Online counselling for eating disorders: Reaching an underserved population?' *Journal of Mental Health*, August 2012

• Davey, Z. et al. 'e-Psychonauts: Conducting research in online drug forum communities' *Journal of Mental Health*, August 2012

• Fernandez-Aranda, F. et al. 'Video games as a complimentary therapy tool in mental health disorders: Playmancer, a European multicenter study', *Journal of Mental Health*, August 2012

• Ennis, L. et al. 'Can't surf, won't surf: The digital divide in mental

health' *Journal of Mental Health*, August 2012

• Bauer, S. et al. 'Technology-enhanced monitoring in psychotherapy and e-mental health', *Journal of Mental Health*, August 2012; 21(4):355-363

• Musiat, P. et al. 'Personalised computerised feedback in E-mental health', *Journal of Mental Health*, August 2012

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