

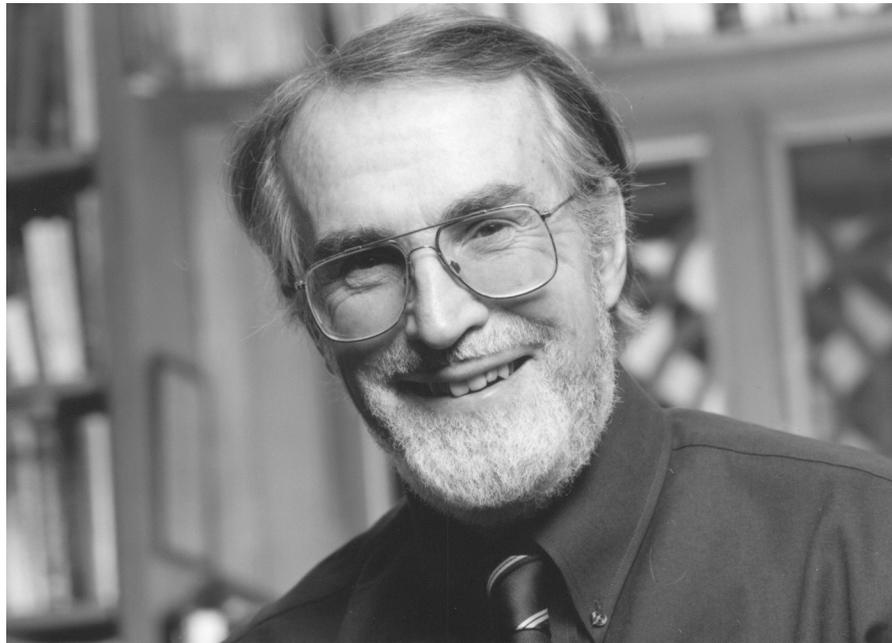
Caring for people with schizophrenia

Jared Lee Loughner, the 22-year-old man who shot and killed six people in Tucson and critically wounded Rep. Gabrielle Giffords is believed to be mentally ill and suffering from the brain disease schizophrenia. Forensic scientists also say that Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter most likely suffered from the same disease.

Approximately 2.4 million people in the United States have schizophrenia, a disease of the brain that results in disintegration of thought processes and emotional responsiveness. The onset usually occurs in the teen years and can occur in a child who has been functioning normally up to that time. A unique characteristic of schizophrenia is the presence of auditory hallucinations and odd delusions often telling the person to do things that are bizarre or harmful to themselves and others.

Dr. Edwin Fuller Torrey is one of the nation's foremost experts on this disease. CNN interviewed Dr. Torrey following the Tucson shootings about what can be done to identify and treat people like Loughner before tragedies such as the Tucson shootings occur. Torrey is founder of the Treatment Advocacy Center, a non-profit organization that has as its goal the elimination of legal and clinical barriers to treatment of the severely mentally ill. He is also the executive director of the Stanley Medical Research Institute, which studies possible causes of schizophrenia. He has received two Commendation Medals by the U.S. Public Health Service and numerous other awards and tributes for his work in the field of this complex disease.

In my telephone interview with him recently, Dr. Torrey said "the state of our mental health system in the U.S. has gone downhill continuously in the last 30 years. These tragedies are the inevitable outcome of five decades of failed mental-health policies. During the 1960s, we began to empty the state mental hospitals but failed to put in place programs to ensure that the released patients received treatment after they left. By the 1980s, the results were evident — increasing numbers of seri-



Dr. Edwin Fuller Torrey

ously mentally ill persons among the homeless population and in the nation's jails and prisons."

He added that evidence of this situation is a 2007 study by the U.S. Justice Department which found that 56 percent of state prisoners, 45 percent of federal prisoners, and 64 percent of local jail inmates suffer from mental illnesses.

In addressing what happened in Tucson, Dr. Torrey added: "Arizona has a good law for involuntary commitment — but no one intervened to get him (Jared Loughner) evaluated and treated. Those shootings were preventable."

If someone in your family or someone you know has these types of symptoms, Dr. Torrey said, "the single most important thing is to get them a good evaluation from a qualified psychiatrist who can also prescribe medication." (Psychologists cannot prescribe medications.)

He emphasized the value of medication for persons with schizophrenia. "Getting them to stay on their medication is important. It may not cure the disorder but will control it in many cases. Schizophrenia is a disease that happens randomly to all personality types — treat that person as if they had Parkinson's or any other brain disease." Dr. Torrey's research has led him to believe that a virus that affects the developing child may

be responsible for schizophrenia. In the past, assumptions that child rearing or home atmosphere might be a cause led many parents to feel ashamed of their child's illness.

Another problematic issue in helping the mentally ill is that of confidentiality. Laws have been put into place with the intention of protecting student privacy. In both the Virginia Tech shootings and the Tucson shootings, school personnel were concerned about the shooter's behavior and violent allusions before the shootings occurred, but were prevented from notifying parents or authorities because of current confidentiality laws. It has been suggested that those laws could be modified to allow school personnel, physicians and counselors to share their concerns with parents and authorities if it seemed that student was either in danger himself or a possible threat to others.

Unfortunately, aside from outpatient counseling and medication, there is very little help available for the seriously mentally ill. Today it is virtually impossible to hospitalize someone with a severe mental illness unless they directly threaten themselves or others with harm. If they do make sufficient threats there are very few private hospital beds for the mentally ill, and most state hospitals have been closed or are so reduced in

capacity that no beds are available. Most mentally ill who are out of control wind up in jail after having committed some minor crime.

Dr. Torrey summed up his feelings about the prevention of events like the shootings at Tucson and Virginia Tech:

"Ultimately, it is important to hold state officials responsible for not providing sufficient resources to treat those who suffer from serious mental illnesses. For almost two centuries, it has been an accepted function of state government to protect disabled persons and to protect the public from individuals who are potentially dangerous. State governments have been very effective in emptying the hospitals in an effort to save money, but remarkably ineffective in providing treatment for seriously mentally ill individuals living in the community."

Persons with schizophrenia often find it very difficult to function in a job or keep social relationships. Due to paranoia from the disease they often reject treatment and medication. They may be able to function well, however, in a structured setting with appropriate medication. Current anti-psychotic medications can relieve symptoms in many patients who can then resume their lives, but it does not cure the disease.

For additional information contact:

The National Alliance for Mental Illness: (800) 950-6264.

The National Alliance for Mental Illness Virginia State Chapter: (804) 285-2864.

For information on the Treatment Advocacy Center or the law and the mentally ill see: www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org. **IPP**

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