MOM WANTS HELP FOR SCHIZOPHRENIC SON

‘He has become violent’

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Health Reporter

SOWETO mother Nonhlanhla Mashabane was shocked when her adult son one day told her that he was hearing strange voices in his head.

It was the beginning of a nightmare that has led to her son assaulting her and ending up in a mental hospital while she constantly has to call the police when he becomes violent.

“We call the police to take him to hospital but they bring him back the next day and then he refuses to take his medication,” she says.

Tshepo Kau, senior social worker at the Central Health Society, says that when a patient displays very aggressive and violent behaviour, the family should call the police to help them take the person to hospital.

Mashabane has done this. She has also enlisted the help of social workers, doctors and faith healers with no luck. Now she does not know what to do.

According to the South African Federation for Mental Health, one in five people in South Africa suffers from mental illness. Of these people, 75% do not receive the care they need.

Mashabane, 43, of White City, says her son Siphiwe Hlongwane, 27, had been a normal, working adult until that fateful day when he mentioned hearing voices in his head.

“I took him to all sorts of people to pray for him but nothing changed,” she says.

He was diagnosed with schizophrenia — a mental disorder characterised by delusions, hallucinations, disorganised thinking, abnormal motor behaviour and negative symptoms.

Mashabane says that two months after he was diagnosed, Hlongwane began talking to himself. Three months later he became increasingly violent. She took him to hospital where he was given medication to subdue him. Mashabane only realised the seriousness of her son’s behaviour when he attacked her with a chair and left her unconscious. He was then admitted to Sterkfontein Hospital where he spent seven months. When he was discharged, he failed to take his medication and reverted back to his violent behaviour. But, like many families faced with a similar situation, Mashabane is frustrated at the lack of institutional support.

Lesemang Matuka, acting head of communication for the Gauteng health department, says usually patients get admitted and are managed in hospital during the acute stage of any illness. They then have to go home once stable and are expected to continue with their treatment at home.

“More often than not this type of patient may be involved in some form of substance abuse and this is what exacerbates their conditions,” he says.

But Mashabane says she has reached desperation point and wants her son to be institutionalised as he is getting increasingly aggressive and dangerous.

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VOICES IN THE HEAD: A patient suffering from schizophrenia is shackled to restrain him. Doctors have described schizophrenia as a mental disorder characterised by delusions, hallucinations and disorganised thinking, amongst others.

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ACROSS the South African Depression and Anxiety Group the causes of schizophrenia are not known and vary for each individual.

Some possible causes range from genetics, brain damage during pregnancy or a difficult birth and environmental stressors.

Also, traumatic events like hijacking, stress at work or exams, street drugs such as ecstasy, tiku, crack, LSD, marijuana and alcohol could be linked to schizophrenia.

Doctor Danie Hoffman, principal psychologist at the Sterkfontein Mental Hospital, said the symptoms include switching from one topic to the next, child-like silliness and goal-oriented behaviour which leads to difficulty in performing daily activities.

The South African Federation for Mental Health (SAFMH) said South Africa has 23 psychiatric hospitals and these hospitals have 11 545 beds for mental health patients, according to an audit report done in 2013.

However, SAFMH indicates that 1.4% of Outpatients facilities and 3.8% of acute beds in general hospitals are for children and adolescents with mental health problems.

They say South Africa has 2.1 beds per 100 000, which is strikingly low compared to European countries, which boast eight beds per 100 000 people.

Hoffman said aggression is not really a symptom but it happens in schizophrenia subtypes. Sadag lists some of the following warning signs that may indicate someone is heading towards an episode of schizophrenia:

Social isolation and withdrawal;
- Irrational, bizarre or odd statements or beliefs;
- Increased paranoia or questioning other’s motivations;
- Becoming more emotionless;
- Hostility or suspiciousness;
- Increasing reliance on drugs or alcohol (in an attempt to self-medicate);
- Lack of motivation;
- Speaking in a strange manner unlike themselves;
- Inappropriate laughter;
- Insomnia or oversleeping; and
- Deterioration in their personal appearance and hygiene.

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