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The New York Times

U.K. Appoints Minister for Suicide Prevention



Image

Britain named Health Minister Jackie Doyle-Price to take on the additional role as minister for suicide prevention, part of a new push to tackle mental health issues. CreditCreditRob Stothard/Getty Images

By Ceylan Yeginsu

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LONDON — Months after appointing [its first minister for loneliness](#), Britain named a minister for suicide prevention as part of a new push to tackle mental health issues.

Prime Minister Theresa May on Wednesday announced the appointment of the health minister Jackie Doyle-Price to the new role. She will lead government efforts to cut the number of suicides and overcome the stigma that prevents people with mental health problems [from seeking help](#).

While suicide rates have dropped in recent years, about 4,500 people take their own lives each year in England. It remains the leading cause of death for men under age 45, according to government research.

“We can end the stigma that has forced too many to suffer in silence,” Mrs. May said on Wednesday at a Downing Street reception to commemorate World Mental Health Day. “We can prevent the tragedy of suicide taking too many lives. And we can give the mental well-being of our children the priority it so profoundly deserves.”

Mental health services in Britain have become increasingly stretched in recent years as demand has increased against the backdrop of budget cuts mandated by the government's decade-long austerity policy.

Lorna Heather, a 22-year-old mother of two, said that after she received a diagnosis of anxiety disorder from her doctor in May last year, she had to wait eight months before she got an appointment for therapy with a specialist.

"Some days I got so anxious I locked myself in a room for hours and just thought about killing myself," Ms. Heather said in an interview at her home in Barrow-in-Furness, England, in the northwestern county of Cumbria. "I came very close."

"I wanted help, and I received some counseling from local charities," she added, "but my condition was more severe than the help they could offer me."

Ms. Heather started receiving cognitive behavior therapy in January, but after eight sessions her therapy was transferred to a clinic far from her home because of staffing issues at her previous clinic.

"It's an hour there, followed by a 45-minute session, and then it takes over an hour to come back on two different buses," she said. "It's just not sustainable to take so much time out of your day when you have young children."

After two sessions at the new clinic, Ms. Heather said, she stopped attending, even though her doctor had recommended six more months of therapy.

Matt Hancock, the health secretary, acknowledged on Wednesday that mental health services had been short of resources as he began a new initiative to put mental health on an equal footing with physical health.

"The truth is that, for an awfully long time, mental health has simply not had the same level of support — both in terms of resources, but also in terms of how we as a society talk about it — compared to physical health, and we want to change that," Mr. Hancock said in an interview with the BBC Radio 4's "Today" program.

"There is a long road to travel to get there," he added. "This is not something you solve overnight."

By appointing a minister for suicide prevention, the government wants to ensure that mental health is made a priority as new funding is injected into the National Health Service, Mr. Hancock said.

The prime minister pledged additional support for mental health services for children and youths, with a new recruitment drive for specialist teams to tackle issues in schools and to provide tools to measure students' mental well-being.

Mrs. May also announced funding for the Samaritans' help line, a free, confidential 24-hour phone line that provides help for those with suicidal thoughts and other mental health issues.

"In my time as health minister, I have met many people who have been bereaved by suicide, and their stories of pain and loss will stay with me for a long time," Ms. Doyle-Price said in a statement on Wednesday.

"It's these people who need to be at the heart of what we do, and I welcome this opportunity to work closely with them, as well as experts, to oversee a cross-government suicide-prevention plan, making sure their views are always heard," she said.

A [report by the National Audit Office](#) watchdog published on Tuesday found that even with pledges of extra support and funding, the government will still fall short of meeting demands for mental health services for children and young adults because of staff shortages, poor data and a lack of spending controls on N.H.S. clinical commissioning groups.

One-quarter of young people who require mental health services are unable to get help from the N.H.S., the report found.

“The government must now ensure a coherent and coordinated cross-sector response, and that the right levers are in place to ensure local actions deliver the national ambitions,” the audit concluded.

Mental health experts have welcomed the government’s new initiative, while also urging ministers to put forward a comprehensive road map to ensure that the new funding and initiatives meet the demands of those in need.

Marjorie Wallace, the chief executive of the mental health charity Sane, applauded the announcement but also warned that the government had not made enough improvements since it pledged to tackle mental health issues two years ago.

Follow Ceylan Yeginsu on Twitter: @CeylanWrites.

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