The Third Annual Michigan Mental Health and Aging Conference took place at the Kellogg Center at Michigan State University on May 23 and 24, 2006. The conference (previously called The OBRA Conference) offers continuing education and training to clinicians in Michigan’s community mental health system and other organizations serving older adults. More than 300 people attended the conference and gave enthusiastic evaluations of the 23 sessions offered during the two days.

Karen Ogle, MD, opened the conference with a plenary session examining end-of-life (EOL) issues for people with serious mental illness (SMI). Dr. Ogle, a professor in the College of Human Medicine and the Geriatric Education Center at MSU, also has extensive experience in EOL care. She discussed a grant project supported by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that addresses the needs of people with SMI as they face EOL issues. Through the grant, the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health has developed a multifaceted project designed to build relationships across the mental health system and the EOL care system. Clinical tools, draft guidelines for EOL care for people with SMI, and other related resources are among the items that can be accessed on the project’s webpage.1

Following the opening session, participants attended one of five four-hour intensive sessions designed to provide more in-depth exploration of complex subjects. The topics addressed included Cognitive Behavioral and Interpersonal Therapies, Motivational Interviewing, dealing with challenging behaviors in persons with dementia, and EOL issues.

One of the most well attended intensive sessions was Buried in Treasures: Understanding and Treating Compulsive Hoarding, presented by Randy Frost, PhD and Gail Steketee, PhD, who are nationally-recognized key researchers in this area. They provided a comprehensive review of current research on hoarding, including intervention strategies for this challenging condition. Doctors Steketee and Frost have written a guide for therapists and a workbook on compulsive hoarding and acquiring that will be published in November of this year.2

The other four intensive sessions were also rated very highly by those who attended them. The presentation on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Interpersonal Therapy included information on the use of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy with older persons. Participants in the

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session on Motivational Interviewing learned about strategies for helping consumers become committed to changing their behaviors and patterns. The presentation on dementia examined the multifaceted reasons why challenging behaviors may occur, addressing both how to prevent these situations and how to intervene if they do occur. The intensive Respectful Death: A Consumer-Centered Culture-Bound Imperative for Optimal Endings, used case histories to explore the complex issues involved in EOL situations.

The second day of the conference began with a welcome by Sharon Gire, MSW, Director of the Michigan Office of Services to the Aging. Ms. Gire, a delegate to the 2005 White House Conference on Aging, pointed out that one of the top 10 recommendations from that conference is to “Improve recognition, assessment, and treatment of mental illness among older Americans.” She also discussed increasing collaborative efforts across the aging network, mental health system, and other service systems to provide optimum assistance to older adults with mental illness and their families.

The keynote address on May 24th was provided by Len Fleck, PhD, Professor of Philosophy and Medical Ethics in the Philosophy Department and the Center for Ethics and Humanities in the Life Sciences at MSU. This presentation focused on ethical challenges in providing health care in the face of finite resources, advances in medical technology, and a growing older adult population. Using interactive technology to stimulate discussion among the participants, Dr. Fleck provided a thoughtful look at the complex issues involved in these moral challenges.

Following the keynote, conference participants selected one of eight 90-minute workshops on topics including psychotropic medications, subcortical brain disorders, aphasia, suicide in late life, psychiatric advance directives, nursing home surveys, and legal issues.

One of the workshops was provided by Gary Kennedy, MD, Director of the Division of Geriatric Psychiatry at the Montefiore Medical Center in New York. This presentation focused on assessing executive function, which is crucial for determining whether a person has the capacity to make decisions and also impacts behavior and ability to function independently. Dr. Kennedy, author of the book Geriatric Mental Health Care: A Treatment Guide for Health Professionals, presented simple tests which can be used in any setting to determine if an individual has impaired executive function.

In the afternoon, participants could choose from eight three-hour sessions on clinical topics, including schizoaffective disorder in older adults, comorbidity in late-life bipolar disorder, working with people with communication challenges, behavioral treatment for depression, and music programs for people with special needs. Additional workshops focused on sensory impairment in late life, the Preadmission Screening and Resident Review (PASARR) process, and the current status of long-term care in Michigan.

After each conference, Mental Health and Aging Project staff compile a notebook of session handouts that can be borrowed in the same manner as the books and videos in the Project library. For descriptions of all of the sessions, visit the MHAP webpage at http://www.lcc.edu/mhap/ and click on the 2006 Conference button. To borrow the notebook of handouts contact the Project secretary, Matt Beha, at beham@lcc.edu or 517/483-1529.

References

1. End-of Life Care for Persons with Serious Mental Illness webpage: http://www.promotingexcellence.org/mentalillness/
2. Drs. Frost and Steketee distributed a flyer offering a discount for those who order the books now. For a copy of the flyer, contact Matt Beha at beham@lcc.edu or call him at 517/483-1529.
3. The White House Conference on Aging webpage can be accessed at http://www.whcoa.gov/
4. A brief article on assessing executive function by Dr. Kennedy can be downloaded from the web at http://www.hartfordign.org/resources/education/tryThis.html. This site also offers other resources on assessment of older adults.