



FEATURE

Commentary: “I’ve lost count of the times my door has been broken by the police”

It comes up on my phone as no caller ID, but I know who is calling. The line is distant, hard to make out, a police officer is using the radio as a phone:

“Where are you? We need to come to see you. There has been a concern for your welfare.”

I trust my GP. It’s taken me a long time to be able to say that, but I know that sometimes, when she is concerned for my mental health, she has little choice. Finding the right help for mental health conditions can be difficult. I’m one of those people who doesn’t fit well into any one specialist service—more than one condition and concern around the risk I sometimes pose to myself—and as a result, my general practice is my mental health team, my crisis team, and sometimes all there is apart from accident and emergency.

“We’re outside your house. If you don’t tell us where you are we’ll break the door in.”

This isn’t an empty threat. I’ve lost count of the times my door has been broken by the police. If I’m at home I’ll answer the door, but when I’m unwell, I’m often not at home. I’m frightened. The last time the police broke my door I suffered a retaliatory attack by my neighbours when I was discharged from hospital; they don’t like the police attention on the street and want me evicted. The community I live in associates police with criminality, disruption, someone they don’t want there. They don’t know that I’ve never committed a crime; all they see is the police, and they want me out.

“Your GP has told us you aren’t safe. We just need to talk to you. We won’t make you go to the hospital.”

Police have become first responders to mental health crisis for people like me. So we’ve been here before. I know the last part isn’t true. The police have been called by my GP, or social work, or a friend who is worried about me, and now they see their job

as taking me to hospital under a section of the Mental Health Act. That’s the reason I’m scared to tell them where I am. I’ve been detained a lot of times before and am terrified of the psychiatric hospital, however kind the police try to be en route. Where I live, once the police meet me, I’ll be taken to hospital, often in handcuffs or in the cage of a police van. Walking through the emergency department in cuffs, even when unwell, I know people are watching, talking. The criminalisation of my mental health doesn’t only occur when there has been no place at hospital and I’ve ended up in a cell.

I have a good relationship with my GP, but it’s hard to rebuild after crisis. I know the only reason she would call police is if she thinks I’m unsafe, but safety to me involves psychological safety as well as my physical safety. Last time I was discharged from hospital the police had secured my shattered door with a padlock on the outside; I couldn’t lock it when I was at home. It was like that for months until I was well enough to arrange repair.

I wish that in crisis my GP had other options than calling police to check on my safety. I know she has tried to arrange emergency psychiatry referrals, or the home treatment team, but that they don’t accept GP referrals. So we are stuck, and I am frightened of becoming unwell, not just because of my illness but because of what happens when people try to help.

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