Removing the Stigma, Promoting Mental Health

WHEN COURTNEY COLES was growing up in Austin, Texas, she sensed something was amiss with her family's response to her great-grandmother's diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. "They didn't really understand what it meant," Coles says. "They said we should just pray about it and she would get better, rather than focusing on facilities or therapies that might be helpful."

As she began educating herself and talking with people in her community, Coles found that there were many misconceptions about neurologic and mental illness. "There is a stigma, particularly in the African American community," says Coles. "People I talked with didn't understand the need for treatment of psychological and cognitive problems. A lot of them felt they were weak if they said they were depressed, and that they just needed to think more positively."

As a senior biology student at Baylor University, Coles worked in an emergency room and had experiences that confirmed her resolve to pursue a career in which she could help to remove the stigma and steer more people with mental disorders toward appropriate treatment. "People would come in who had reached the point of being suicidal," she says. "When we would sit down and talk with them to explain that psychotherapy was a great option, or that there were medications that could help, they understood. But when they talked with other people in their lives – their family members, their pastors – they got a different understanding. I knew that research and having evidence-based information to give these people would be really helpful."

So after graduating from Baylor, Coles enrolled in the UCLA School of Public Health as an M.P.H. student in the Department of Epidemiology. Now in her second year, she has taken advantage of opportunities to conduct research on issues of interest to her. Last summer, Coles began working as an intern in the Los Angeles County Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology, analyzing data from the Los Angeles County Health Survey. Specifically, Coles studied the nature of cost as a barrier to mental health and other services, broken down by factors that included race, ethnicity, gender and insurance coverage.

Coles was also part of a group at the school headed by Dr. Vickie Mays, professor of health services, that studied perceived discrimination among African Americans, Latinos and whites in mental health and substance abuse treatment services. She recently started a study with Mays of the experience of racial discrimination among African American men and whether it has an impact on physical health.

After completing her M.P.H. education, Coles plans to apply to the school's Ph.D. program in the Department of Health Services. New federal laws – both the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 and the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 (see page 8) – hold the promise of increased access to mental health treatment. "I want to study mental health services in the African American community," Coles says. "With these changes there is great opportunity, and research will be an important tool for making sure that people in the community are getting the services they need."

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