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Consumer Mental Health Workers: Exploitation Dressed Up as Empowerment?

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The consumer mental health workforce is often conceptualised as the fundamental shift that is needed to address the harm caused by psychiatric services that are reliant on biomedical explanations of distress, and that engage daily in coercive and involuntary practices. Consumer workers, who bring their lived experience of mental illness and the mental health system to the role, are thought to provide much needed alternative perspectives on mental health care. Yet, just how much transformation is possible, when consumer workers are being asked to work within mental health units that are locked, contain seclusion rooms, and that regularly use chemical restraint to control patients' behaviours? Given that consumer workers have often been long-term unemployed, how much capacity do they have to challenge their new employers' practices, and to advocate for change? Qualitative studies suggest that discrimination by mental health staff against consumer workers occurs on a daily basis. Furthermore, consumer workers who adopt similar perspectives on professionalism to non-consumer staff are most likely to receive praise and to be promoted. Their employment within the mental health system seems to do little to address the much needed winding back of psychiatric dominance, instead contributing to "business as usual."

Please note: I am only able to attend the conference on Tuesday 24 November. I apologise for the inconvenience.