

## THE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH INDUSTRY?

How the field describes itself has important implications for advancing its objectives **BY DOUGLAS J. EDWARDS,**  
MANAGING EDITOR

When most people hear the word *industry*, they probably envision factories, widgets, assembly lines, machines, and smokestacks—definitely not the stuff of behavioral healthcare. Yet for some reason, practitioners of mental health and substance abuse services have come to view their work as an industry. Of course, *industry* is a versatile word that can be applied correctly to the delivery of behavioral healthcare, but I wonder if behavioral health would be better described as a profession, field, or even calling.

I have used *industry* quite frequently to describe behavioral health service delivery, and many of the authors in *Behavioral Health Management* have, as well. It's part of behavioral health's lexicon, but perhaps it's time to think of behavioral healthcare in a different way. After all, the way we use labels has important implications for how we—and others—view behavioral healthcare. In the fight for parity, for example, do behavioral health professionals really want their field to be viewed as an industrial enterprise? Or would they rather it be viewed as another branch of healthcare, a professional discipline that deals with emotional and behavioral disorders?

Perhaps I'm just mincing words, but I don't feel that



*industry* is the right way to describe the work involved in behavioral healthcare. Behavioral health certainly has an "industrial" component: Outcomes, standards, and metrics are all important to managing the delivery of mental health and substance abuse services. Yet *industry* seems to be a cold and impassionate way to describe a profession built on helping others. In my humble opinion, the term does not adequately reflect the caring, resolve, and dedication intrinsic to behavioral health services.

So perhaps it's time to choose a different way to describe behavioral healthcare. I'm not a behavioral health practitioner; it's up to them to choose how to describe their work. As someone who writes about the field, however, I suggest using terms such as *profession*, *discipline*, and *field*. These words better embody the practice of behavioral

healthcare without the images of auto plants and economic indicators that come to mind when using *industry*. And perhaps among themselves behavioral health advocates should refer to their work as a *calling*. Caring for those with mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders can be frustrating, and those who rise to the challenge daily must have some special quality that makes their work fulfilling.

As I said, it's not up to me to determine how behavioral health describes itself. You'll still find *industry* in the pages of *Behavioral Health Management* and in our marketing literature. But I'm going to

be more cautious in its use, deferring as often as possible to terms that I feel better describe the delivery of behavioral health services. I encourage you to do the same. With more appropriate ways of describing itself, behavioral health just might be able to make more progress in erasing stigma, advancing parity legislation, and invigorating its frontline workers who, although the hands-on staff of behavioral health, are hardly cogs in a behavioral health machine. **BHM**

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