CARE FOR CARERS

The tool that is changing lives

Edith Cowan University researchers have developed a tool that helps support mental health carers - the first of its kind in Australia.

The Mental Illness Carer Assessment Tool, or MI-CAT, is designed to help practitioners better treat and support people in the community who care for mentally ill family members or friends.

MI-CAT took five years to craft by ECU social work lecturers Lynelle Watts and David Hodgson in conjunction with health workers, ECU students and affected community members. It has already been trialled in seven mental health practices across Perth and Bunbury.

The highly successful project was a rare opportunity for University staff to work on a voluntary basis with community carers, whose own health is often neglected while they look after others.

The unique tool, which was part-funded by the Mental Health Commission and carried out in kind by ECU staff, will now be rolled out across other practices.

“We were contacted by Bunbury Pathways because they had a carers’ retreat and they had a lot of data and they had a lot of research, but they didn’t know what to do with it,” Ms Watts says.

“So they came to us at the ECU social work program and we created a partnership with them and attached student field placements to convert that information into a tool.

“All along, carers were involved in formulating the research, data analyses and the reports, so they’ve been a really massive part of the whole project.”

The tool is two-page assessment sheet that practitioners who look after carers can use to structure a support regime and improve the patient’s quality of life.

Ms Watt says the project led to a large number of other services wanting to implement the tool, with Bunbury Pathways and ECU now formulating a training plan to guide more practitioners on its use.

Often carers of mentally ill people have a high-level of unmet needs and experts say this can develop into illness.

The project has led to carer needs being addressed and practitioners report that the tool provides them with a solid base for referring patients for specialist treatment or services.

“It’s pretty unique in that it’s been formulated with carers’ involvement. That hasn’t really happened a lot in Australia; it’s more common overseas but it hasn’t happened much here,” Ms Watts says.