CATW Sample Response Essay to “The Woman Who Died in the Waiting Room”

Have you ever encountered a homeless person who appears to be mentally ill? I have, and I’ve wondered about the person’s life story. How did he become homeless? Would he still be on the street if he had healthcare, medication, and financial support, or did he choose this life? In the article “The Woman Who Died in the Waiting Room,” Jeneen Interlandi uses the case of a woman who died on the floor of a psychiatric hospital waiting room, ignored by staff, to talk about some of the problems the mentally ill face in our society. Interlandi notes that people who are mentally ill do not receive appropriate care. She makes the point that many people who are mentally ill would be able to function normally if they received regular medication and counseling. She also talks about how three groups of people, the poor, the uninsured, and the undocumented, are particularly vulnerable. Although Interlandi makes a good point that people who are mentally ill deserve better treatment, I believe that the reasons behind society’s poor treatment of this group need to be considered, too.

There is definitely a lack of resources and supportive institutions for people who suffer from mental illness. Interlandi writes in her article that psychiatric hospitals started to close down in the 1960s and that the general thinking was that someone with a psychiatric problem shouldn’t be institutionalized. As a result, many of these people are in mainstream society, not receiving the support they need. While I don’t think people should be cut off from the outside world, sometimes people need to escape the pressures of everyday life to be able to focus on getting better. They need to rest, and a hospital isn’t always the appropriate place for this, given its high expense and its focus on physical illness. There need to be more facilities for the mentally ill. At the same time, I’ve read in *The New York Times* about terrible care at some of these facilities. An article I read reported that workers at one place in particular withheld patients’ medication and didn’t bathe them. We need more institutions to support the mentally ill but we also need the government to monitor these places so that patients receive appropriate care.

In addition, the people who suffer the most in our society are those who can’t speak for themselves. The author focuses on individuals without money or health insurance, as well as the undocumented (people without citizenship or immigration papers). These individuals are definitely the most vulnerable in our population because they can’t advocate for themselves, in order to receive more social services or government help. A woman I went to high school with suffered from serious depression and had to leave her college for a while. She was treated at an institution and was able to return to her university. But this woman had a family and network of people looking out for her to help her get better. If she had been alone, she would not have gotten help and things could have gotten worse really quickly. As Interlandi notes, those suffering from mental illness, especially people without resources, need assistance. We can’t expect people to help themselves out of a crisis.

To build on this point, the problem is that often in these situations, no one is watching or monitoring these people who really need help. Interlandi points out that many people admitted to hospitals would never need emergency care if they received regular medication and treatment. People who are mentally ill can pose a danger to themselves or to others. They can become violent or act out in unexpected ways, with potentially tragic outcomes. The Newtown, Connecticut shooting was just one example of this. I believe the solution to this problem is more affordable health care so many emergencies can be avoided and people don’t suffer as much. Preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place would benefit the people themselves and our society.

America needs to do more to help people who need it, by making sure that positive institutions, regular care, and advocacy are available for them. Reading this article made me think a lot about responsibility in our society. It is not just the government that is responsible for helping its citizens. We must all act.