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'Damaging, degrading'

One in five of us will experience mental illness

Yet only one in 10 who need help will be able to get it

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Canada is in the grip of a mental health crisis.

Mental illness is damaging our children, degrading our elderly and robbing those in their prime of the fruits of a productive life, experts insist.

So widespread is the neglect of the problem, mental health was labelled an "orphan child" in Commissioner Roy Romanow's report on the future of health care.

In total, 80 per cent of Ontarians will be affected by mental illness themselves or by the mental illness of a family member, a friend or colleague, according to the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario branch.

"No one is immune, and at some point in their lives, all Canadians are likely to be affected through a mental illness in a family member, friend or colleague," Health Canada concluded in its groundbreaking *A Report On Mental Illnesses In Canada*.

"If cancer were treated in the same way as mental health and addiction, this would be considered a scandal of epic proportions," says David Kelly, spokesperson for the Ontario Federation of Community and Mental Health and Addiction Programs.

Bill Wilkerson, co-founder of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, a leader in the movement to address mental health and addiction problems in the workplace, calls mental illness "the heartbreaking voice of our times."

"Let us use that time to resolve — among ourselves and without our collective powers — to hear that voice and to answer it once and for all," he says in a speech that he's scheduled to deliver today to the annual meeting of the Ontario Medical Association.

Consider these facts, just part of the overall dismal picture painted by mental health, community and government agencies and experts:

★ At least one in five of Canadians will experience mental illness. That represents 2.2 million people in Ontario.

However, in 2001-2002 spending on mental health and addictions made up only 10 per cent of Ontario's health care budget when it was responsible for up to 24 per cent of all disability.

★ About 4,000 Canadians commit suicide each year. That, experts point out, is roughly equal to one jumbo jet falling out of the sky every month.

★ Mental illness and addictions cost the Canadian economy \$33 billion a year in lost productivity.

★ Mental health claims have overtaken heart disease as the fastest growing category of disability costs in Canada. These claims are costing Canadians more than \$5 billion a year in lost work days.

Yet Health Canada estimates only one in 10 people actually get help for mental health and addiction issues, Senate hearings were recently told, and they must wait anywhere from eight weeks to six months.

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Senator Michael Kirby, charged with reviewing the mental health system in the wake of the Romanow report, has said Canada "does not have a national action plan for mental health, mental illness and addiction."

Mental illness and addiction are linked to physical illness, poverty, unemployment, homelessness and a host of other social problems.

Up to 85 per cent of those with serious mental illness are unemployed, experts report.

And studies have found more than third of homeless people, including up to 75 per cent of homeless women, have mental illness.

One estimate says at least 20 per cent of the prison population has a mental illness and, if addiction and substance abuse problems are added, the number rises to well over 50 per cent.

The personal stories of people with mental illness and addiction are heartbreaking and disturbing.

Jason Best, 38, has had depression most of his adult life. Once, he studied media arts at college and looked forward to a career in broadcasting. Today, he lives on provincial disability pension and has to visit food banks to make ends meet. "You become so isolated people don't want to talk to you and you feel the whole world has written you off," he says.

Phil Upshall, who has bipolar mood disorder and is president of the Mood Disorders Society of Canada, was jailed for eight months at the height of his illness. The judge stressed his need for psychiatric help, but despite his attempted suicide, Upshall says he obtained no significant support in jail. Upshall now says the number of fellow inmates with mental disorders and addictions astounded him.

Ann, a person with schizophrenia who did not want her full name used to protect her children, tells of her frustrating attempts over months to get help for alcohol addiction. Her mental illness means she must be detoxified in hospital before entering an alcohol treatment program. But when a detox bed finally became available, there was no spot in a treatment program, so she missed out.

The irony is that, despite mounting social, economic and personal costs, not enough money is being spent where it can do the most good — in the community.

Mental illness currently accounts for the longest stays in hospital, with 25 per cent of the 34 million hospital days used in Canada each year being used to treat people with mental illness.

Even though it costs \$170,820 a year to care for a person with mental illness in hospital and anywhere from \$100,000 to \$250,000 per year to keep them in jail but only \$34,418 a year, including income support, to support someone with mental illness in community Ontario's community health services budgets have been frozen for the past 12 years, according to community agency advocates.

The Community Services Federation says three things must happen immediately.

First, community-based mental health and addiction services must have their funding stabilized and increased.

Second, more supportive housing must be built for people with mental illness and addictions. And third, more support must be given to peer and self-help initiatives for them.

Kelly says he has some optimism since the Kirby hearings have raised the profile of mental health. His final report is expected in the fall.

Dr. David Goldbloom, spokesperson for the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, says as a society we must do more.

"We ... must recognize that people with mental illness and addiction deserve the same access to health care and treatment as people with heart disease or cancer," he says.

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