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Tackling mental health in the workplace

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Mental health problems, such as stress and depression, have reached such crisis proportions in the workplace that a coalition of senior business leaders will announce its backing tomorrow for comprehensive research aimed at creating healthier work environments.

With mental disability now accounting for an estimated 30 to 40 per cent of the disability claims being recorded by Canada's major insurers and employers, the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health is poised to announce two major research initiatives aimed at identifying management practices that lead to -- or exacerbate -- depression and mental illness among employees.

Employers have "beaten the safety problem" to a large extent, said former federal finance minister Michael Wilson, who has recently been appointed by the federal government in Ottawa to act as a special adviser on mental health.

But there is far less understanding -- or action -- on mental health issues, which can be aggravated by working conditions or a reluctance of employees to seek help, Mr. Wilson said.

Mr. Wilson, president and chief executive officer of Toronto-based UBS Global Asset Management (Canada) Co., lost his 29-year-old son, Cameron, to suicide in 1995.

Employers are becoming increasingly aware of the rising costs of disability claims from employees suffering from stress and depression, Mr. Wilson said.

Far less is known about the cost of lost productivity by employees who continue to work while suffering from these conditions.

A study to be led by the Harvard Medical School will survey more than 100,000 Canadian employees to document the cost benefits of early and effective treatment of depression in the labour force, particularly among men and women in their prime working years, Mr. Wilson said.

In a second major research initiative, to be announced tomorrow, the Canadian Institutes for Health Research will embark this summer on 10 years of applied research on mental health in the workplace.

Bill Wilkerson, chief executive officer of the business and economic roundtable, said yesterday his organization will help raise money for the research projects and will enlist employers to volunteer their workplaces "as laboratories for the research." One of the goals is to "eliminate the most egregious forms of chronic job stress at source," he said.

Uncertainty about job security, "management practices which isolate people from information [and] the relentless treadmill effect at work" all contribute to soaring stress loads, he said.

Rémi Quirion, who will co-ordinate the research at the CIHR, a national public research agency, said he hopes one outcome of the project will be to reduce the stigma still associated with mental illness. "Mental illness is more of an issue than back pain, for example. People are suffering from burnout, but it's not properly recognized because of stigma; employees are afraid to talk about it for fear of losing their job."

Yet, added Mr. Wilson, there can be "tragic consequences" when people are afraid to seek treatment or ask their employers and co-workers for help. He related in a recent interview that his son did not want his battle with depression widely known because he was afraid it would affect his employment prospects.

Dr. Quirion said employers are more willing than they were in the past to help employees suffering from stress and depression, "but there is still very little in the way of best practices."

The scope of the research will be announced this summer, said Dr. Quirion, who said he would like to see studies on people who thrive under pressure as well as on those who are struggling. He agreed with Mr. Wilkerson that young working adults are the most vulnerable to stress and depression.

"As a young person, you want to move ahead in your work. You work hard to show that you have the ability for it, that you are productive, that you are dynamic, that you have new ideas," Dr. Quirion said.

Business could be doing more to help, Mr. Wilson said.

"One of the dreams that I have is that we replicate with mental illness what has [successfully] been done with safety in the workplace," he said.

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