

'Crisis' in children's mental health

Parents, experts meet to focus attention on issue

One in five kids, youth suffer from mental illness

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For years, they have pleaded for money and services to help children who are depressed, violent or suicidal. This week, parents and professionals caring for kids with mental illness got a sign that maybe somebody is starting to pay attention.

On Monday, about 30 medical experts, advocates and parents from across Canada and even Britain came to Toronto to deliver their plea at a special roundtable on children's mental health. The meeting was aimed at moving the issue higher up on the public health agenda.

Those listening included Senator Michael Kirby, chair of a federal committee reviewing Canada's mental health system, and Bill Wilkerson, head of a national initiative to address mental health in the workplace, and the organizer of the meeting.

Among the messages they heard:

★ Lack of services and funds to help children in distress amounts to a "a huge crisis," Dr. Richard Guscott of the Guscott Taylor Mood Disorders Clinic in Hamilton, said in a background paper presented to the meeting.

★ Roughly one in five children and youth suffer from such illnesses as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, bi-polar and conduct disorders, with many going undiagnosed and untreated due to lack of resources. Desperate parents don't know where to turn.

★ Kids can wait many months for treatment at children's mental health centres and more than a year for an appointment at hospital psychiatric clinics.

★ Although depression is highly treatable, the rate of detection among adolescents is "a tragically low" 7 to 20 per cent due to a lack of services, Guscott said.

★ The average age of onset for depression is getting younger, currently at 23, and in more than half of

cases, symptoms start before age 20.

★ Suicide is the second leading cause of death among Canadian adolescents, behind accidents. According to UNICEF, Canada has the third worst rate for suicides among those ages 15 to 19.

★ The average age for onset of anxiety disorders among Canadians is 12.

Wilkerson, co-chair of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, said the state of children's mental health services comes as "a shocking awakening." When his global business and economic roundtable began consultations a few years ago, kids' mental

health wasn't even on its radar screen.

"I had no idea how desperate the lack of services was," Wilkerson said in an interview.

But since listening to professionals, advocates and families, he has made it part of his mandate.

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Children's mental health is a workplace issue, he said, because it is all about the future labour force.

It also affects many of today's workers who are caring for mentally ill children. They typically face huge stress levels that diminish their productivity and need support from employers.

At the same time, workplaces have an impact on kids' mental health. When adults bring stress home, Wilkerson says, it acts like "second-hand smoke" that permeates the environment and sucks the spontaneity and energy from families.

will release in April for working parents. It will also be the basis for a report to the Kirby committee.

In his remarks to Monday's meeting, Dr. Ian Goodyer, foundation professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at the University of Cambridge in England, stressed the importance of taking the message to politicians.

He said that's how mental health has moved up the agenda in Britain, where it is now one of the top three public health priorities. Recent developments include the launching of a mental health research network and initiatives to address the needs of children and youth and to curb adolescent suicides.

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In Canada, however, the response has been dismal, Guscott said, with only 2 per cent of medical research dollars going toward mental illness.

In his 2002 report on Canada's health care system, commissioner Roy Romanow called mental health an "orphan child." Simon Davidson, CEO of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario in Ottawa, told the roundtable that means child and adolescent mental health is "the orphan of the orphan."

Dr. Jean Wittenberg, head of the infant psychiatry program at Sick Kids in Toronto, stressed that most kids with emotional, behavioural or psychological disorders could be identified and successfully treated if there were adequate funds and services available. But at his own clinic, for example, the average wait to get an appointment is a year.

He said new funding must be secured and more professionals trained. In Canada, an average of 10 child psychiatrists graduate each year. Cuts to education and social services means there are also fewer social workers and psychologists available in schools and communities to intervene early and to refer children at risk for help.

Children's mental health advocates at the meeting were hopeful it was an important step.

Susan Hess, of Parents for Children's Mental Health, an Ontario support and advocacy network, said she's encouraged the issue is being recognized by some in the business sector and at the federal level.

Hess, whose daughter suffered for years with mental illness, including bouts of suicidal and violent behaviour, before getting the help she needed, has been fighting on behalf of kids and families ever since.

Foundation grant, and for the first time, Hess was invited to a pre-budget consultation with provincial Finance Minister Greg Sorbara.

Gordon Floyd, executive director of Children's Mental Health Ontario, which represents more than 80 community-based children's mental health centres, said the special meeting on Monday is a big breakthrough.

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