

Depression among public servants Canada's biggest 'public health crisis': Expert

BY KATHRYN MAY, OTTAWA CITIZEN JANUARY 11, 2010



A file photo of The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) on Queen Street West in Toronto. Depression among Canada's public servants is the country's biggest "public health crisis," says a leading mental health expert.

Photograph by: Colin O'Connor, The National Post

OTTAWA — Depression among Canada's public servants is the country's biggest "public health crisis," says a leading mental health expert.

It's an affliction among the country's nurses, teachers, police, military and bureaucrats at all levels of government, undermining innovation, productivity, quality of service, policy-making and even the relevance of our democratic institutions, said Bill Wilkerson, founder of Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Mental Health.

Stress, burnout and depression is evident in all workplaces, especially in times of economic turmoil. But few employers have as profound a problem as the federal public service where the health effects of mental distress has been termed an epidemic.

"The public service is a tsunami of distractions — meetings, everything questioned, delegated, people moving ... and no one is really in charge," said Wilkerson. "It's the most transient, fluid, unsettling work environment on the planet, so why wouldn't people be anxious and in distress? They are human beings."

Disability claims in Canada are climbing and between 30 to 40 per cent of them are for depression. In

the public service, mental health claims doubled between 1991 and 2007 and now account for 45 per cent of all claims. Meanwhile, the number of other health claims has dropped.

Studies of federal executives found three quarters felt on the verge of burnout or extreme fatigue. More startling was that 15 per cent of the top executives and one in four entry-level executives who felt “verbally harassed and tormented.” Executives in the private sector typically feel less stress because they have more control.

Wilkerson argues an inertia and paralysis have gripped the public service that’s compounded by an “ambiguity” around who is in charge. Such an environment takes its toll on people, many whom leave work every day frustrated and feeling they have accomplished nothing.

And he pins some of the blame on the cascading effect of the diminished role of Parliament, MPs, and cabinet ministers, which came with the massive centralization of power in the office of the prime minister.

On top of that, partisan politics has become factious, “vicious and emotionally violent,” among MPs, all of which trickles down to the workings of the public service, he said.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper put mental health on the agenda when he created the Mental Health Commission, headed by former senator Michael Kirby, to help develop a national mental health strategy. Harper spoke about its ravages and the need to break the stigma of depression and mental illness at the funeral of former MP David Batters, who committed suicide after a battle with depression.

The public service is heading into uncertain times. Speculation is rife that the public service will be the first place the Harper government turns for spending cuts when wrestling with its mounting deficit. There are rumblings of changing or cutting public servants’ generous pension and benefits plans.

But Wilkerson argued the big savings will come by reforming management in the public service, which will go a long way to reducing disability claims. He said the across-the-board cuts that government’s typically resort to will only eat into the public service’s productivity.

“Pension reform and benefit reconstruction will not save the government money until it creates a work environment that protects mental health and the disabling effects of job stress and depressive disorder. Depression is the public health crisis in the government of Canada. Period.”

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