

Mental illness neglected

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Statistics Canada released a study on Wednesday that reported that 2.6 million Canadians suffer from mental illness or addiction. Almost half of those people - 1.1 million - do not receive the basic services they need. This tragedy must not be lost on health ministers as they meet in Halifax this week.

Imagine the public outcry if half of Canada's cancer patients were not receiving treatment. Imagine half of Canada's heart patients having no access to basic medical care. Imagine half of Canada's diabetes patients not receiving insulin. Those who suffer from some form of mental illness outnumber those with cancer, heart disease, diabetes and other, similar, serious illnesses.

The problem is actually more severe than the survey reveals. StatsCan studied only a selection of mental illnesses, leaving out such afflictions as schizophrenia and childhood disorders.

When all forms of mental illness are taken into consideration, experts agree that there are about six million Canadians who suffer from these illnesses, but social stigma and discrimination make it difficult for them to seek out the care they need.

Most developed countries have a focused strategy to address these problems; Canada does not. Our governments champion investments in health care. They invest in research and health promotion for cancer, heart disease and other important areas that are the topic of frequent media commentary. They have failed to produce any national, co-ordinated strategy on mental illness.

Canada needs a national action plan on mental illness that will build on this benchmark study by establishing a national data collection and reporting system, implement a national research strategy, establish national standards for services and provide and target necessary resources.

Health-policy makers acknowledge that good mental health leads to healthy families, productive workplaces and strong communities. Unfortunately, governments have been slow to implement co-ordinated strategies on mental health.

Too many Canadians are slipping through the cracks and this burden is falling disproportionately on the poor, seniors, children, youth and aboriginal peoples.

There is significant stigma associated with mental illness. Few are willing to admit to having such a problem. Many others are not diagnosed, and therefore do not seek treatment.

According to the World Health Organization, mental disorders are the third leading cause of disability, just behind infectious diseases and injuries - outstripping cardiovascular disease in terms of loss of life and ability.

Twenty per cent of Canadians will experience a mental illness. Suicide accounts for 24 per cent of all deaths among 15 to 24 year olds. About 1.5 million hospital admissions a year result from

anxiety disorders, bipolar disorders, schizophrenia, major depression, personality disorders, eating disorders and suicidal behaviour. Mental illness accounts for 14 per cent of lost workdays.

Mental illness has not historically carried the same weight as other diseases. But there are six million Canadians desperately waiting for access to the services they need. They are waiting for the federal government to demonstrate leadership and target necessary resources to services that Canadians can count on.

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