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HEALTH SOLUTIONS

MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AND CHANGING NEEDS

The treatment of mental health issues has lagged behind other areas of medical science, although significant gains have been made in recent years. Despite the advances, mental health issues continue to be overwhelmingly undertreated. One way of improving access is to capitalize on the workplace as a key focus through which individuals can access specialized, expert care as a supplement to and in conjunction with treatment provided through their primary care providers. One way of improving treatment outcomes is greater collaboration amongst all providers (both private sector and publically funded supports) involved in an individual's care pathway. When these initiatives are ingrained within an approach to care, everyone benefits.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, mental health has become a significant national issue in Canada. Where in the past many bore through their mental health issues without treatment or were stigmatized for needing treatment, public awareness has begun to shift to the point where the proactive treatment of mental health has become an important focus of public policy, scientific inquiry and private sector initiatives.

Despite advances in health care in recent decades, the burden of mental health problems on individuals and society remains significant. With one out of five Canadians experiencing mental health issues,[1] and with associated health care costs and lost productivity nationally amounting to nearly $50 billion a year,[2] the demand for access to effective treatment services far outstrips supply. And when services are available, they are often not accessible in a timely manner. As many have come to realize, even when mental health issues are quickly identified, accessing treatment through Canada's mental health system can be a difficult proposition.

In this context, much can be gained where private employers and governments at all levels in Canada come together to embrace mental health care service alternatives that enhance the effectiveness of the health care system more generally.

"proactive treatment of mental health has become an important focus"

UNDERSTANDING THE NEED FOR SUPPORT

The mental health issues experienced by 20% of Canadians include disorders and syndromes resulting in mild to moderate to severe levels of impairment. For example, in a given year, approximately 4% of Canadians suffer a major depression, defined as persistent, pervasive low mood,[3] and 12% suffer a minor depression,[4] defined as two depressive symptoms presenting for two weeks.

In terms of cost, mental health requires immediate investment; the long-term impact of failing to treat mental health issues creates considerable strain on Canada's provincial health care systems. The case for increased investment in providing advanced mental health support early on can be easily made from an economic standpoint. Delaying diagnosis and treatment can exacerbate symptoms and has been shown to vastly inflate the ultimate cost of treatment. Indeed, providing those who may have mental health issues with easy access to effective, initial treatment pathways will help prevent untreated conditions from becoming increasingly severe and difficult to diagnose and treat.

"a staggering 44% of Canadian workers have had a mental health issue"

WHO DOES IT AFFECT?

Mental health issues affect everyone – no one is immune, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, occupation or virtually any social variable considered.

There are a number of general indicators that can be considered to identify those who are more susceptible to mental health issues. In studies of depression for example, those who work in a high demand, low control environment – call centres, being a prime example – are most at risk of developing depression as a result of environmental factors.[5]

Complicating the task of making an effective mental health diagnosis is the simple fact that very often mental health conditions are rooted in an individual's physical pain experience. Fifty percent of individuals experiencing chronic pain report severe levels of depression.[6] In the medical community, a mental health condition developing alongside chronic pain or other medical issues is known as comorbidity, meaning that disorders or diseases are occurring at the same time, thereby further complicating diagnosis and treatment. Maladaptive behaviours commonly seen in depression – overeating, smoking, excessive consumption of alcohol, and a sedentary lifestyle – are all important risk factors for many chronic physical illnesses that are responsible for approximately 60% of global mortality (including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and respiratory illnesses).[7]

The reality is that the assessment and treatment of mental health issues requires sufficient time for a proper mental health assessment which includes an examination with diagnostic testing as appropriate as well as a review of relevant scientific literature and the individual's own health history. Many times this is left to a primary care provider and/or the individual's treating physician, who may lack the specialized training in mental health and/or the time necessary to perform an adequate assessment. Studies show the average physician interrupts a patient 18 seconds into description of their symptoms,[8] and this is not so much an indictment of doctors as it is an observation on the stark reality faced by users of the health care system.

For employers in Canada, the stigma historically attached to mental health issues and the lack of accessible and effective treatment pathways have contributed to mental illness becoming the leading cause of long-term disability in Canada. The Conference Board of Canada reports a staggering 44% of Canadian workers have had a mental health issue, with 12% currently experiencing a mental health issue.[9]

Mental health issues represent over one third of all short-term and long-term disability claims, and 70% of short-term and long-term disability costs.[10] A mental health claim can last 65 days and come at an average expense of approximately $18,000.[11]

"government, employers, employees, and the population as a whole benefits from increased mental health awareness initiatives"

GROWING AWARENESS OF MENTAL HEALTH

Studies suggest government, employers, employees, and the population as a whole benefits from increased mental health awareness initiatives. These have a positive impact on society, and have proven to offer great value and return on investment. As many Canadians are touched by mental illness, initiatives of this type have overwhelming support from the populace as a whole.

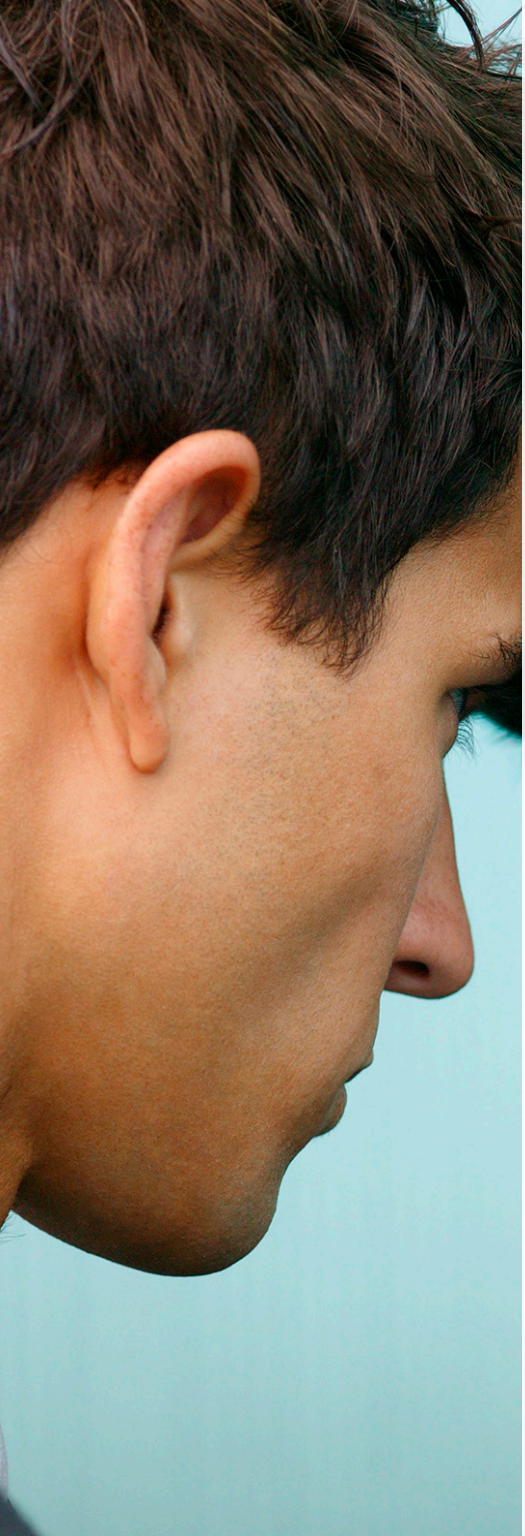
The Government of Canada and its respective departments and agencies have acknowledged the link between mentally healthy workplaces and their ability to meet respective business needs,[12] as studies suggest productivity may drop by as much as 50% due to mental health issues.[13]

Where experts see the relationship in the statistics, physicians witness this correlation firsthand. When pressed on the role of mental health initiatives and what services will have the greatest impact, physicians recommend social support rather than medication.

Employees with lower stress have higher workplace effectiveness (as defined by fewer absences, less presenteeism, and higher engagement), and cost less in terms of time away from the workplace due to mental illness.

Accordingly, there is considerable demand for effective health service alternatives and pathways from all stakeholders. Eighty-five percent of respondents in a 2012 survey believed those with mental health conditions could be just as productive as other workers with the proper supports, while nearly two-thirds of managers and supervisors wanted better training to assist employees.[14]

The UK National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) estimates that by improving the management of mental health in the workplace, losses to productivity could be reduced by 30% and result in net annual savings of approximately $400,000 CDN in an organization of 1,000 employees.[15]



BARRIERS TO ACCESSING CARE AND IMPEDIMENTS TO TREATMENT

Even with greater awareness, misleading perceptions regarding mental health remain, and this has a profound impact on many who are in need of support. Ideally, diagnosis and treatment of mental illness comes early, as the first signs of mental illness appear. However, individuals are demonstrably reluctant to report mental health difficulties for fear of judgment or embarrassment. In sum, for many the stigma is of greater immediate concern than the mental health symptoms that they may be experiencing, with the result that they are less inclined to seek out treatment.

Even when patients obtain treatment, the results can be mixed. When treatment is prescribed, approximately one third of patients never fill the prescription, and another third fill it but do not take the medication. Finally, the last third take the treatment,[16] but there is no guarantee they are administering it to themselves properly. Without support and openness regarding mental health treatment, it will be hard to improve these realities and reach out to those in need.

Fortunately, views have been changing and as a society we are continuing to break down the barriers and stigma associated with mental illness. As Canadians we are much more cognizant of mental illness and the national dialogue has improved, although much remains to be done. Fourteen percent of those surveyed still believe mental illness is something one can "snap out of".[17] This is a dangerous misconception that greatly impacts those with mental illness.

The combination of fear of being judged and the perception that there is no help available is a troublesome mix, and predictably leads to the underreporting of mental illness. A recent study suggested that over 40% of individuals with a mental illness did not receive treatment.[18]

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Tellingly, Canada only directs 7% of health care spending towards mental health, while most developed nations average 10-11%.[19] Limited access to psychologists, social workers, or psychotherapy treatment has resulted in a compelling case for making available private health care options which include relying more on independent assessors whose specialized expertise can help devise an optimal treatment pathway for affected individuals.

Many companies have also turned to private health care providers to ensure their employees receive the right treatment plan, and to improve coordination with medical professionals. Private providers can ensure coordination and help remove the stigma and confusion surrounding mental illness – as well as appropriate diagnosis and treatment of individuals – by taking a psycho-educational approach to supporting the needs of those with mental health issues.

Information also needs to be openly shared and provided to all types of groups, including caregivers, post-secondary institutions, and community organizations. Information sharing and discussion are paramount to reducing the stigma associated with mental health. Enhanced educational opportunities, awareness and knowledge also generally lead to earlier intervention, which is critical to providing assistance for those struggling with mental illness.

Early and proper mental health assessments and identification is imperative so clinicians can evaluate an individual's condition, confirm diagnosis, recommend a treatment plan (a specific algorithm of care) and assess prospects for return to function or return to work. Here, an integrated approach, such as doctor-to-doctor consults, would enable assessor specialists to correspond directly with an individual's family physician in order to ensure collaboration in treatment between the specialist and the primary care provider.

With this comes a need for broader integrative care, which means creating a nationwide system of accessible high quality and results-based mental health care. This system is founded on collaboration between the mental health specialist, primary care physician, therapists involved in the care pathway, case managers (if applicable) and others noted in the treating of the individual to create and sustain individualized recovery and return-to-function plans. This provides comprehensive care for the individuals and enables individuals to receive efficient and effective treatment for mental health issues.

Early intervention where undertaken with accurate diagnosis and collaboration amongst medical professionals fosters a faster recovery and better outcomes. Individuals are able to identify and proactively address mental health issues, thereby considerably reducing the risk of a given mental health condition developing in severity.

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