



Mood Disorders Society of Canada

Société pour les troubles de l'humeur du Canada

www.mooddisorderscanada.ca

November 14th, 2011

Dear Minister,

As you prepare for the upcoming provincial/ territorial Health Ministers meeting to discuss the 2014 health care accord, November 24th-25th in Halifax Nova Scotia, Mood Disorders Society of Canada (MDSC) urges you to ensure mental illness is prioritized within these discussions.

Mood Disorders Society of Canada (MDSC) is a national, not for profit, consumer driven, voluntary health charity committed to ensuring that the voices of consumers, family members and caregivers are heard on issues relating to mental health and mental illness; and in particular with regard to depression, bipolar illness and other associated mood disorders. MDSC fulfills its mandate through an active partnership approach that engages like-minded organizations in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

As you are aware, mental illness has a significant impact on the lives of a great number of Canadians. With one in five Canadians experiencing a mental illness each year, nearly 750,000 residents of Alberta will be directly affected. Of particular concern is the number of Canadian children and youth affected by mental illness at any given point in time.

MDSC worries about the fact that adolescents under 20 years of age have the highest rates of depression symptoms among all age groups. Yet 90% of those who are depressed never seek treatment. Mainly due to stigma. Stigma is a major barrier preventing people from seeking help. Many people living with a mental illness say the stigma they face is often worse than the illness itself. This is very disturbing because 80% of those who seek treatment respond well.

As I am sure you know, depression impacts virtually every Canadian family. In September 2011, MDSC conducted a pan-Canadian mental health survey among those Canadians with whom we have had contact. We did this in order to determine their opinions about their experiences and concerns regarding of the health care system that served them or their family member. While we hoped for 1000 responses, we received an overwhelming 3,125 responses. Over 500 individuals provided additional written comments to individual questions within the survey. We knew that Canadians care deeply about the level of mental health care provided to those presenting with a possible mental illness however this level of response and involvement caught even us by surprise!!

The following represents the key findings of the survey;

- **Thirty-Five (35%) of the respondents with a mental illness waited more than 12 months for a diagnosis.** It is unacceptable to us that individuals who seek medical attention for their mental illness continue to wait lengthy periods of time before they receive a diagnosis.
- **Fifty-nine percent (59%) of respondents reported that uninsured services prevented them from seeking the type of support they preferred** such as from a therapist, psychologist, or alternative health care.
- **Fifty-two percent (52%) of respondents reported visiting a hospital emergency department because of their mental illness,** and of those respondents 50% indicated that they were moderately to extremely dissatisfied with the care they received; 24% alone were extremely dissatisfied. Wait times in emergency rooms continued to be very long and negative attitudes (stigma) towards people with mental health issues from front line workers persisted.
- **Sixty-five percent (65%) of respondents indicated that their local hospital did not provide adequate care for patients with mental illness.** The number one reason selected was that the hospital “does not seem to prioritize mental illness”. Respondents to the survey were so passionate about the level of care provided by their local hospital that 27% shared a written comment in addition to selecting their response from the list provided. The constant theme of their messages was that the level of care provided to them or their loved ones was very poor.
- **Forty-One (41%) indicated that “increase funding for mental health services”** was the issue that government must act upon immediately followed by 22% who selected “develop more safe affordable housing.”
- **Fifty-Six (56%) reported that their number one funding priority was to shorten wait times** to get mental health services (from patient request to time of receipt of services).

Canadians in every province are looking to their respective provincial and territorial Ministries of Health to adequately address their mental health care needs. From a health care systems perspective, dedicated funding for mental illness remains unacceptably low and not proportionate to the burden of illness. While mental illnesses constitute more than fifteen per cent of the disease burden in Canada, only six percent of total health funding is allocated to mental health care in the last accord in fiscal year 2003/04.

As you work towards the 2014 health care accord, MDSC urges you to ensure the following are implemented;

- **Place mental health at the forefront of the agenda during the upcoming Health Accord negotiations;**
- **Dedicated funding for mental illness proportionate to the burden of illness and include currently unfunded services for treatment;**
- **Prioritize mental illness and psychiatric services in the wait times strategy.**

We wish you the very best in your upcoming meeting and hope you will agree with our position that it is imperative that mental health services and funding are increased to address this health epidemic. Thank you in advance for your consideration to include these important discussions during the negotiations on the 2014 health care accord discussions in Halifax.

We would be pleased to discuss the survey results with you or your staff at any time.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "P. Upshall".

Phil Upshall
National Executive Director
Mood Disorders Society of Canada