



Taking mental health issues seriously

Stephen LeDrew
National Post
Thursday, April 14, 2005

Yesterday, I wrote in the Post's letters section about the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, which met Wednesday at the Toronto offices of CIBC to discuss the state of care for Canadians who suffer from mental illness. I write now to describe some of our conclusions.

The group of concerned doctors and citizens, approximately 70 in all, included Michael Wilson (the former federal finance minister), Tim Price of Brascan Financial, Bill Acton of Great West Life, Ontario's Lieutenant-Governor James Bartleman, and our host John Hunkin -- all people who understand the human and economic toll exacted by mental illness.

Fully one-third of Canadians will suffer from some form of depression or anxiety or substance abuse in their lifetime. It has been calculated that mental disorders cost Canada \$33-billion annually in lost industrial production alone. When it is considered that only 2% to 3% of Canada's total medical research budget is devoted to mental illness, it is clear we must do more to address the ongoing crisis.

A famed mental health researcher, Dr. Ron Kessler of the Harvard Medical School, spoke yesterday to underscore the urgency of the situation. The average age of those first afflicted by mental illness, he noted, is now just 15. As a result, the demographic that has suffered the greatest vulnerability consists of new workforce members.

In response, the Roundtable endorsed an inquiry into better ways to initiate early and effective treatment of depression. Such an initiative, we concluded, would not only help patients, but provide tangible economic benefits to businesses and unions. This coming June, the Roundtable and the Ontario Chamber of commerce is coming together for an Economic Summit on Mental Health and Productivity in Ontario -- a pilot project that will track the progress on an implementation plan for managing mental disabilities in Canada.

The Roundtable also heard about the anti-stigma campaign, which I will chair. This body will do exactly what its name suggests: help minimize the stigma associated with diseases such as depression and anxiety, so that they can be discussed and dealt with in the open. Mental illness is treatable. But we must understand it before we can have an open discussion about it.

Thirty years ago, the concerns of those who were physically disabled had yet to be addressed. But now, every building and every street curb has been modified to allow disabled access. Twenty years ago, AIDS was not spoken of, but now it is being dealt with effectively. The anti-stigma committee is determined to ensure that mental illness will soon be added to this list.

Stephen LeDrew is a Toronto lawyer and broadcast commentator.