

Depression costs business; Workplace support is 'good management practice,' forum told Researchers seeking 65,000 subjects for Canadian study

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Building workplace supports for depressed employees is a profit-making venture, a forum on mental health and the workplace was told this week.

"It is not rocket science," said Michael Wilson, senior chairman of the Global Business and Economic **Roundtable on Addiction** and Mental Health. "It is just good management practices."

More than four dozen high-profile executives, scientists, health researchers and labour experts came together with the goal of launching Canadian research into mental health problems on the job.

Dr. Alain Lesage said the Canadian Institutes of Health Research has committed \$3.5 million over the next five years for Canadian research into workplace mental health. The agency wants employers - large and small, government and private - to allow their work environments to become a "testing lab" and will issue a call for research proposals in June, he said.

The study would bring a Canadian perspective to the Harvard Medical school study on depression in the workplace conducted by Dr. Ron Kessler and published last year.

The researchers were seeking 65,000 subjects to take part in the Canadian arm of the study.

"You can't manage what you can't measure," Kessler said. "No other condition accounts for even half the burden of depression."

Research has shown it costs employers \$10 to \$35 (U.S.) per day for each employee with undiagnosed and untreated depression, he said. However, with proper treatment, within a year all costs are recovered and a firm actually makes an extra \$1,100 to \$1,800 per year per employee, he said.

Depressed employees take from 15 to 24 days excess sick leave a year, studies have found. Even when they are not off sick, depressed employees have from 20 to 30 "presenteeism" days - days when they show up for work but accomplish very little, the group heard.

Fewer than one in five people gets treatment for depression, but of those who do get treatment, about a third get inappropriate care, Kessler said.

For example, many patients get just 10 milligrams a day of antidepressants such as Prozac, which means "they might as well get Gatorade," Kessler said.

A minimum of eight 30-minute sessions in cognitive behaviour therapy has been demonstrated to be effective, but research shows only 28 per cent of patients get enough, he added.

Roundtable spokesperson Bill **Wilkerson** told the group of the barriers and stigma employees with **mental** health problems face. In one case, he said, a 15-year employee with a major firm who had been off with depression faced a group of 20 different employer representatives when she tried to organize her return to work.

"This is all too common a scenario at a time when people need simple help to get back on their feet," he said in an interview.

Mental illness is as serious a crisis for Canadians as terrorism and the current woes over government integrity, said the publisher of the Toronto Star.

"This is not just a health care problem, a funding problem or a government problem," Michael Goldbloom told the group.

"This ... problem demands a response from society as a whole including employers."

Goldbloom and Jim Orban, publisher of the Ottawa Citizen, appeared as part of a group called Publishers for Mental Health, which is dedicated to educating people and employers about mental health issues.

Orban cited statistics showing the average age of onset for anxiety disorders in Canada is 12 and said Canada has the third worst teen suicide rate in the world.

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