

National Invitational Symposium on Child and Youth Mental Health

Background

It is well understood that promoting good mental health for all children and youth is vital to achieving their lifelong health and wellness. This is a goal of Canadian families and of the many diverse professionals who serve the needs of children and youth every day in our society.

It is recognized that there has been a great deal of work going on within the provinces, territories and nationally to promote child and youth mental health. There is much to learn from each other about the current state of research, knowledge, program and policy development that could better inform and support our work in this area. Similarly, the accumulated knowledge and experience about the challenges and obstacles faced will greatly benefit our work.

There are a wide variety of organizations, people and professionals who are actively involved with mental health both directly and indirectly, which constitute a network of mental health activities. These networks are complex and interwoven and often not well understood. As a result the interaction can be disjointed, fragmented and conflicting, although there are emerging examples of well-integrated and cohesive models that can be utilized to better inform systems development.

The lack of a cohesive approach to child and youth mental health and illness at a national level has also contributed to the lack of a full appreciation by Canadians of the relative importance of this critical population health issue. Fuelled by the inherent stigma associated with mental illness and mental health problems, this lack of cohesion can actually contribute to the gaps between need and resources, knowledge and practice, and ultimately, between the actual and potential health and well-being of our children and youth.

These issues were raised in the final report of the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, titled *Out of the Shadows at Last: Transforming Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addiction Services in Canada*, which was released in May 2006. The report highlights the need to address the mental health system and the rights and needs of all Canadians, young and old. Similarly, the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Article 23) recognizes that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.

The Senate Committee's final report indicated that the need for mental health reform is immediate. It concluded that "children and youth are at a significant disadvantage when

compared to other demographic groups affected by mental illness, in that the failure of the mental health system affects them more acutely and severely”.

The Senate Committee heard from the start of its work that a national mental health strategy is required. The Committee recognized that “mental health, mental illness and addiction issues resonate with every level of government; they affect, to all intents and purposes, the entire population of Canada”. The Committee particularly noted that although provinces and territories are responsible for delivering mental health services, strategies must be inclusive of local, regional, provincial/territorial and national considerations.

On March 19th, 2007 the federal government announced that it will “establish and support a Canadian Mental Health Commission to lead to the development of a national mental health strategy”. Child and youth mental health has been identified as one of the five initial priorities of the Canadian Mental Health Commission.

There is now a renewed opportunity and urgency to build upon the work of many and to bring together interested parties from all sectors of child and youth mental health to commence work.

Purpose

A planning group has been established to develop a national perspective on the key issues pertaining to child and youth mental health. Please see Attachment ‘A’ which lists the current membership; it will continue to grow. The primary objective of this planning group is to promote inter-sectoral, cross-sectoral and participatory dialogue that will grow and develop during 2007 and thereafter.

In order to achieve this objective, a planning group has been established to organize a National Invitational Symposium planned for **September 17th & 18th, 2007** at the Intercontinental Hotel in Toronto. This planning group is representative of a number of key stakeholders including federal/provincial/territorial governments, service providers, researchers and policy organizations. It will be instrumental in developing the National Symposium program and identifying the key participants from across Canada who can contribute to the development of this initiative on a sustained basis.

The purpose of the National Symposium is:

1. To bring together interested parties, representing different areas of child and youth mental health from across Canada and sharing in a common vision of the holistic health and wellbeing needs of our young people with a commitment to putting such a vision into action.
2. To gain a better understanding of the current programs, research, activities and planning in provinces and territories that will better inform a national perspective.

3. To identify exemplary models, research programs, plans and strategies (be they from Canada or beyond) that can support the further development of child and youth mental health in Canada.
4. To identify common issues and themes which are of interest and significance for further development.
5. To identify the opportunities for inclusion of key constituencies and communities of interest in furthering this work.
6. To build consensus and momentum for the National Consortium on infant, child and youth mental health that can support the development of an action plan.

Key themes discussed to date include:

- advocacy
- research
- knowledge exchange
- education and training
- public awareness
- youth and family participation
- community involvement
- networks, partnerships and stakeholder engagement
- outlining resources for all of the above.

It is recognized that this National Symposium is a necessary and preparatory step in the development of national partnerships and linkages. Further it is anticipated that this National Symposium will act a catalyst to the development of an expanding network of partnerships focussed on child and youth mental health. It is anticipated that further work on a national conference will occur as well.

More information can be obtained by contacting:

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