



# Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental Health

Issue 6

Newsletter for the Mental Health Community

January 2009



## Message From Stan

### Dear Friends of the Chair,

I am pleased to announce that our team has grown since our last update in September. Yifeng Wei and Alan McLuckie will be working with our group as Research Assistants. Yifeng Wei has a MA in Education from York University with a specialty in school physical health research and will be co-leading our school mental health initiatives. Alan McLuckie is a social worker currently pursuing his PhD at UoFT and will be working on a national child and youth mental health strategy project.

In October the Chair celebrated its second anniversary with a public event at the IWK Health Centre. Many stakeholders and community partners were in attendance. The event gave us a great opportunity to update people on the work we have been doing and the direction we plan to go in the next year or two.

Looking forward, a major focus for the Chair will be addressing school mental health. With most children and youth spending about thirty hours a week in the classroom, the school environment is an ideal place to begin the work of addressing the mental health needs of young people. Not only does the school offer a simple and cost-effective way of reaching youth, but it is also a convenient place where mental health can be linked with other aspects of health, such as physical health, and with learning.

One of the ways that schools can address mental health needs in schools is through the creation of mental health promotion strategies, such as curriculum development and implementation. Last year the Chair helped develop a Mental Health and High School Curriculum Guide in partnership with the Canadian Mental Health Association. This year

we have developed an accompanying mental health training program for teachers. The training will be given to educators in four pilot sites across Canada. The project will then evaluate whether the curriculum and teacher training had a positive effect on the knowledge and attitudes of school staff and students. This project will advance our understanding about whether curriculum implementation and teacher training may be an effective, evidence-based strategy to enhance mental health literacy in schools.

Another opportunity for the Chair to enhance mental health in schools is through a needs assessment and evaluation of school-based Youth Health Centres. Starting in the New Year Judy Elliot (Director, Mental Health and Addictions at the IWK Health Centre) and I will take the lead on an initiative to improve the linkages between school-based Youth Health Centres and services offered by Mental Health and Addictions at the IWK.

Finally, in an effort to work more closely with the education community, the Chair has established an Educator Advisory Group. Joining the group are key members from the Department of Education, Nova Scotia Teacher's Union, Capital District Health Authority, IWK Health Centre, as well as principals, guidance counselors and teachers. The purpose of the EAG will be to advise the Chair on how to enhance mental health in schools. This is a great opportunity for us to discuss relevant issues and develop a framework to address school mental health needs.

Building on this advisory model, the Chair has also re-established its Youth Advisory Group with help from Andy Cox, Mental Health Patient Advocate at the IWK Health Centre. The Youth Advisory Group's primary role will be to advise the Chair on what resources to develop to address mental health problems in young people. The group will also provide feedback about projects we are developing.

As you know one of our signature projects has been the Transitions book. With media coverage from Live at Five, Breakfast Television, and articles in Moods Magazine and University Affairs, we were able to take the Transitions project to the next level. The resource for post-secondary students was offered to universities and colleges across Canada. So far fourteen institutions have purchased and are using Transitions, which has

generated over \$30,000 to help fund future Chair projects that will enhance the mental health of youth. All of this work has been led by Jacqueline Boucher and assistant Nancy Green who have done an amazing job in creating and promoting this resource. In fact, the project has been so successful that we are now looking at ways to market Transitions in the US and UK.

With all our projects and programs in development the [teenmentalhealth.org](http://teenmentalhealth.org) website has become an important promotional tool for us. The site is a place where people can access and download resources we have created. Our website and my new blog are opportunities to provide evidence-based information on adolescent mental health to youth, parents, patients, health professionals and anyone else that visits us online. David Venn is to be congratulated for his excellent work in advancing the development of the website.

One new resource available for download on our site is an evidence-based medicine guide for patients. The EBM guide provides patients with a comprehensive understanding of the scientific basis for medical treatments (biological, psychological, social) and how to communicate with their health care provider when discussing medication and other treatment options. The next phase of this project will be to create a youth version of the guide and offer it to consumer groups across Canada.

Clearly we have our work cut out for us for 2009. But with our two new employees, the other dedicated members of our team, and our expanding community partnerships, I am confident and excited about the direction the Chair is moving.

I wish you a very happy holiday season. If you would like any more information on the activities of the Chair please contact David Venn or Tracy MacKenzie at (902) 470-6598.

Sincerely,

Dr. Stan Kutcher

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## Facing Mental Illness: A Ten-step Plan for Nova Scotia

By Stan Kutcher and David Venn

Op ed to the Chronicle Herald (October, 2008)

What does the face of a person with mental illness look like?

This question is at the heart of this year's national anti-stigma campaign "Face Mental Illness", which is the theme of Mental Illness Awareness Week (Oct. 5-11). In Canada, nearly one in five people is living with a mental illness. Mental disorders are some of the most disabling medical conditions affecting our population with about 70 per cent of mental disorders onsetting prior to age 25. They exact a huge negative impact on health, civil society and our economy. Yet a strong and persistent stigma prevents millions of adults and youth from accessing and receiving the help they need to get well and say well.

While the scientific understanding and treatment of mental health and mental illness has advanced considerably in the past decade, the public perception of people with mental illness has been much slower to change. A recent national survey conducted by the Canadian Medical Association found extremely high rates of stigma against those who suffer from mental disorders, permeating all aspects of Canadian society. This is consistent with previous awareness that stigma against those living with mental disorders is endemic in our social structures and institutions – including our health, social services and justice sectors.

Stigma is the polite work for discrimination. There is no room in our caring society for discrimination against those living with mental illness. There is no reason for those living with mental illnesses to be denied adequate housing or equitable health care or to spend their lives in the shadows. Like every Canadian, they deserve the

best available care, designed to meet their needs, equitably and effectively delivered.

The recently established Mental Health Commission of Canada has announced that it will be addressing stigma against the mentally ill through a national strategy, and work on that strategy is now beginning. However, Nova Scotians should not need to wait until a national strategy is unveiled. How about starting with these ten steps to improve mental health in this province:

1. Upgrade the current provincial health plan to fully integrate mental health care into primary care.
2. Establish a child and youth mental health policy and plan that commits to providing equity in health access to all young people suffering from mental disorders.
3. Enhance the funding for the treatment of those with mental disorders, basing all interventions on best available scientific evidence.
4. Address youth mental health needs as the cornerstone of mental health promotion and prevention activities. Focus these activities in schools and in community organizations active with young people.
5. Support the creation and distribution of mental health literacy programs to enhance knowledge about mental health/mental illness for the public, professionals and policy makers alike.
6. Allocate a specific portion (20 per cent) of the Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation funding for mental health research – especially in areas traditionally receiving little research support (such as child and youth therapeutics, mental health in underprivileged or marginalized populations).

7. Establish innovative community-based and appropriately supported housing that meets the needs of the mentally ill – and link this to the development and delivery of peer support training for those individuals living with mental disorders who wish to obtain it.
8. Demolish the Provincial Psychiatric Hospital and move acute, long term and ambulatory mental health services into community locations
9. Establish novel mental health competency training programs to upgrade the mental health treatment skills of all health providers – so people with mental disorders can get their care from the same people who look after their diabetes, cancers and heart disease.
10. Establish youth engagement and intervention programs that will prevent young people from ending up in jails and establish mental health courts for all offenders who are currently rotating through the legal system.

In a recent editorial, Michael Howlett, President and CEO of the Mental Health Commission of Canada stated that "Mental health is an issue whose time has finally come". While he was addressing the national scene, work in our own backyard can start now. Societies are judged by how they treat their most vulnerable citizens. Nova Scotians are too good a people to continue our practice of ignoring the needs of our brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, friends and neighbours because they live with mental illness. It time we faced the issue and did ourselves proud.