



Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental Health

Issue 2

Newsletter for the Mental Health Community

September 2007



Message From Stan

Dear Friends of the Chair,

Our first newsletter went out last April and I hope it provided you with an insight into some of the activities the Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental Health has undertaken. This issue will focus on what has happened since April, and what my plans are for the coming months.

I am pleased to announce that our team has grown since our last update. The Chair's summer students Martha Carmichael and Brittany Barnett are close to completing research projects on the teen brain and adolescent development. Magda Szumilas has received a grant to research the quality of youth suicide resources on the web and will continue to work for the Chair throughout the fall. Dr. Andrea Murphy has been hired as a research associate for the Chair to help develop a variety of psychopharmacology educational resources targeting the needs of various groups of health providers. Her experiences as an educator, clinician, and researcher in pharmacotherapeutics will help with generating and answering questions about psychotropic medication use in adolescents and translating the findings to relevant stakeholders. We have also hired Ainslie McDougall as a research assistant who will work with me to research and publish academic papers. Ainslie has recently received her Masters in Science and Forensic Psychology from the University of Surrey in the UK.

In June Dr. Sonia Chehil and I initiated the training of the IWK Health Centre team in our Understanding Adolescent Depression and Suicide Education Training Program. This multi-disciplinary team will now provide this training to the IWK mental health program staff and other IWK Health providers. Plans are currently underway to expand this training to physicians, educators and other health providers in the Maritimes (see page 2).

Jacque Boucher, a local writer and graphic designer hired by the Chair has completed work on a pilot project consisting of a book and booklet entitled "Transitions: A Student Reality Check". The publication is designed to inform first-year students about the challenges they may encounter as they transition from high school to post-secondary education. The publication is being distributed in orientation packages this fall to incoming students at Dalhousie, Saint Mary's, Mount Saint Vincent, NSCAD University and the Nova Scotia Community College. We have recently received funding from Sun Life Financial to develop phase two of this project which will include translation of the materials into French and an evolution of the pilot project.

One of our major projects has been the development of a website for the Chair. The website (www.teenmentalhealth.org) will offer teens and families the highest quality of scientifically-based information about the teen brain, sleep, adolescent behaviour, medications, mental illness, and suicide. The site will also offer researchers, health professionals and educators the opportunity to access a virtual library of scientific articles on adolescent mental health, download presentations and tools, and check out the Chair's educational projects. The website is still being developed, but should be ready by the end of October.

During National Mental Health Week in May, Ms. Szumilas and I published an op-ed in the Chronicle Herald on how gun legislation can reduce youth suicide (see page 3). In June, I spoke at the National

Congress on Psychopharmacology in Istanbul on the topic of "Rational and Therapeutic Choices in Child and Adolescent Psychopharmacology". Over the next few months I will be presenting at conferences in Rwanda, Toronto, Ottawa, Boston, Mexico, Cuba and Hong Kong. Now we are looking ahead to Mental Illness Awareness Week (Sept. 30 – Oct. 6) and working with the mental health community and the IWK Health Centre to promote awareness of mental disorders.

If you would like any more information on the activities of the Chair please contact David or Ricardo. This newsletter will be distributed again in a couple of months when we have more updates.

Sincerely,

Dr. Stan Kutcher

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Understanding Adolescent Depression & Suicide Education Training Program

The creation, development and delivery of a training program to enhance understanding of youth depression and suicide is one of the Chair's signature projects. The Understanding Adolescent Depression & Suicide Education Training Program is a strategy designed to enhance the knowledge of health professionals, physicians and educators to understand, recognize and assess depressed and/or suicidal youth, as well as appropriately refer them for treatment.

The training program addresses both health and education systems using a three-tiered approach, targeting physicians, health professionals and educators. Using an approach that is based on understanding key concepts and grounded in evidence-based principles, the training program is designed to help health providers and educators communicate with each other so that young people at risk can be better identified and served – without falling through the cracks.

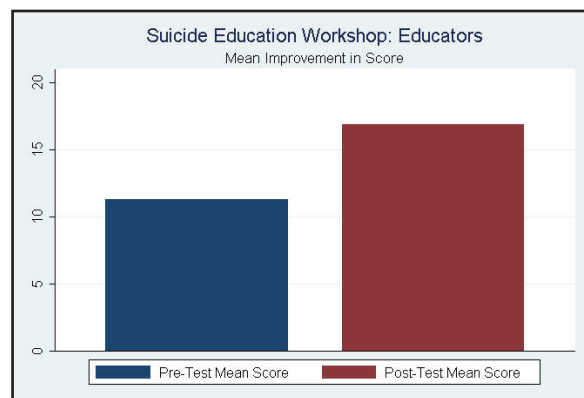
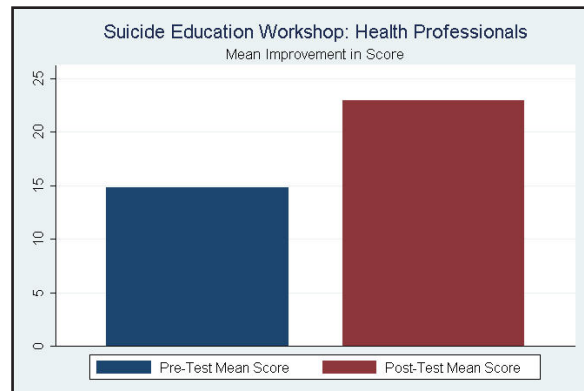
Early versions of this training program have already been offered to educators, mental health professionals, youth justice workers and youth service providers in Ontario and Alberta in collaboration with the Canadian Psychiatric Research Foundation. The results of the pre and post tests from the three training sessions show a significant knowledge increase for both educators and health professionals (see figures 1 & 2). The qualitative feedback for the training program has also been encouraging. Here is what some participants have said:

"It has been the best workshop I have ever attended. The content was relevant to the work I do. I left enriched in my knowledge and skills."

"The information was rich and very impactful, extremely informative and thought-provoking."

"I enjoyed the science-based information, up-to-date data, reference to the literature and the de-bunking of myths."

The next stage for the Chair is to complete the materials for the training program, request funding to support the training program for educators and health providers across the Maritimes, and to adapt the training program to be offered online as web-based professional development.



Gun legislation can help reduce youth suicide

Dr. Stan Kutcher and Magda Szumilas
Chronicle Herald op-ed

National Mental Health Week (May 7-13) is an opportunity for Canadians to look at some of the ways they can improve their mental health by achieving a balance between the social, physical, spiritual, economic, and mental aspects of life. It also provides an opportunity for us to remind ourselves that mental health issues affect each of us and that we need to engage our communities in a variety of actions that will promote mental health and improve the lives of those who suffer from mental disorders. Sometimes we need to act to deal with issues that at first glance may not seem to be related to mental health but at closer look are found to be integral to mental health.

For example, the recent shootings on the campus of Virginia Tech were a heartbreaking reminder of the devastation caused by gun violence. When events of this magnitude occur, they force us – as a society and as individuals – to reevaluate our opinions on many issues and reflect on ways these tragedies can be prevented. Though we may never completely eliminate events such as the Virginia Tech shootings, we can use the experience to teach us how to deal with more common, but equally tragic situations, like youth suicide.

Suicide is the outcome of a complex interaction of genetic, psychological, social, cultural, and

environmental factors. It is also highly related to mental disorders, especially those that are unrecognized and untreated. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among Canadian youth. Guns account for almost one quarter of all deaths by suicide, and are not only one of the most common methods; they are also the most lethal.

An important risk factor for youth suicide is access to guns. A large body of research correlates the rates of gun ownership and suicide by firearms. Studies of adolescents have confirmed that youths living in gun-owning households have higher rates of suicide. Public health specialists and health care providers alike note that if lethal means like firearms are not readily available when a person decides to commit suicide, individuals might delay the attempt, and in some cases, decide not proceed.

In 1977, the Canadian firearms control legislation (Bill C-51) was established to restrict the acquisition and sale of firearms. Furthermore, it legislated as an offence the carrying, handling, shipping or storage of firearms or ammunition in a careless manner, or without reasonable precautions for the safety of other persons.

Although not specifically a youth suicide prevention strategy, the conditions put forth by Bill C-51 were intended to reduce harm associated with firearms, including unintentional

and self-inflicted injuries among all Canadians. A second legislation, Bill C-17 (1991), introduced background checks and a mandatory 28-day waiting period for approved applicants. This legislation has helped reduce the percentage of suicide by firearms.

Last year, the Nova Scotia government produced a public health framework to address suicide in youth. A key goal was to reduce access to lethal methods such as firearms. This commitment represents a step in the right direction. It is, however, just one part of a systematic and evidence-based approach to suicide prevention, which must also include improved health services for young people with mental disorders, responsible media reporting of suicide, and better identification of “at risk” youth.

In the wake of the Virginia Tech tragedy, it is imperative that we continue to improve our legislative, regulatory and social approaches for stricter gun control. Not because it will prevent another Virginia Tech (although it might), but because it may prevent the much more common tragedy of youth suicide. The available evidence supports the argument that legislative intervention has been successful in reducing the percentage of suicide by firearms. Limiting access to guns should be a priority, both for general safety of the population and as a