



MENTAL HEALTH COMMISSION OF CANADA

MICHAEL HOWLETT'S SPEECH TO THE TORONTO BOARD OF TRADE

I want to thank you Desjardins and the many other sponsors of this event, for inviting me to speak to you today. As Canada's largest Board of trade, you bring to any discussion of mental health in the workplace a credibility and a reputation for tackling the serious issues of business. I applaud you for giving mental health the attention it needs.

Thank you also for inviting me to speak as part of these important Awards. Psychological illness in the workplace isn't just a large issue; I believe it is the issue when it comes to Canada remaining competitive in the knowledge economy. Any opportunity to celebrate psychological health is important in reaffirming the defining role that mental health plays in the workplace.

Having come from the business world myself, it is especially opportune to speak to you about mental health in the context of business, in my new role as President and CEO of the Mental Health Commission of Canada.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada is a new organization, created by the federal government in its budget of March 2007. I might add that no previous government has taken such a decisive, major or enduring action on mental health.

I want to begin by outlining the Commission's central mission, and what has been accomplished so far. At the same time, I want to underscore the very real crisis Canadian business faces as a result of mental illness in the workplace, and why we need to look at and act on workplace mental illness in a different and more serious way.

The Commission grew out of the most extensive exercise in consultation on mental illness ever conducted in this country. That consultation process became the basis of a report of a Senate Committee chaired by Senator Michael Kirby called "Out of the Shadows at Last." It was the first report produced in Canada that viewed mental illness

from the perspective of both the total mental health system, and the total health care system in Canada.

The need for such a report was obvious: mental illness will affect 20% of the population – that is one in five of us in this room -- and is won't leave many families untouched. In fact, all over the world, the most prevalent, persistent and incapacitating illness is not cancer or heart disease or even diabetes.

In Canada. In America. In China. In every country, they're finding depression is concentrated in men and women in their prime working and earning years. That depression not only reduces their productivity – it reduces their spending power. We know the downward spiral that creates. Many more people suffer from depression than the next five deadly illnesses combined. And depression is only one of many mental illnesses.

So the problem the Commission was created to help fix is huge.

But there is another, equally important reason for our existence. Canada is the only G8 nation that doesn't have a national mental health strategy. The only one. The absence of such a strategy has made our efforts to get help for people affected by mental illness largely fragmented and ineffective.

While the Commission is a “national” body, it is not a “federal” one. We operate at arms-length from government. Our main task is to develop a national mental health strategy that is centred on the idea of “recovery.” Because, for the vast majority, recovery is possible. That is, people living with a mental illness can either become fully functional as citizens and family members, or they can lead reasonable lives within the limitations imposed by their illness.

The Commission will lead the development of a national strategy that will focus on the most effective and efficient ways to provide services to the millions of Canadians who will experience some form of mental illness.

We will be a catalyst for reforming the delivery of mental health services and for change in public attitudes and actions.

The Commission will also be a major information-provider to government, care providers and the public, and we will encourage collaboration and knowledge-exchange within and across different sectors.

Mental illness is a national problem in need of a national solution that takes into account our unique and often frustrating jurisdictional realities. That said, a strategy that sits on a shelf does no one any good. It must be useful and practical – yet far-sighted and demanding.

Because a strategy which is perfect but never implemented because it is not politically feasible, is useless.

We like to say that a Canada-wide strategy must be “just inside the outer edge of political feasibility.” We must push the system as hard as possible -- while still ensuring progress is achieved.

For the Commission to be a Canadian leader in mental health reform, we must create new partnerships and engage a new generation of volunteers. In fact, we must be the catalyst for the creation of a major social movement such as those that formed around fighting diseases like cancer and heart disease.

This social movement for mental health will ensure that mental illness stays out of the shadows forever!

By ‘new partnerships,’ I don’t just mean working with established stakeholders, though we are getting strong cooperation from every player in the mental health field, including all the provincial and territorial governments and mental health service delivery organizations. But it’s also crucial that we form new kinds of partnerships to get everyone working more effectively together.

So how are we going to do this?

Well, it’s early days yet.

We’ve put a board of directors in place and set up advisory committees of some of the best experts in Canada from every area of mental illness. We’ve opened up offices in Calgary and Ottawa.

A management group is in place. These leaders are in the midst of recruiting their teams. As the President and CEO, my first task is to create the infrastructure that will ensure the Commission is fiscally responsible and able to achieve its objective of bringing together the collective efforts of other mental health organizations. We won’t provide mental health services directly. But we will provide a constantly evolving knowledge base that’s desperately needed in this field.

We will also be at the table to guide policy development with a national perspective.

We will also boost awareness in the business, government and health care communities that mental health will no longer be the orphan in the health care system.

All of these initiatives are crucial in our efforts to move mental health from the bottom of the health care agenda to where it should be -- at the top.

But as important as these initiatives are -- what is even more critical is to address the elephant in the room head on. That is the stigma and the discrimination that continues to surround mental illness. It is a force that often causes more suffering than the disease itself.

Let me give you a view on this challenge:

“In no other field, except perhaps leprosy, has there been as much confusion, misdirection and discrimination against the patient as in mental illness...

Down through the ages the mentally ill have been estranged by society and cast out to wander in the wilderness. Mental illness, even today, is all too often considered a crime to be punished, a sin to be expiated, a possessing demon to be exorcized, a disgrace to be hushed-up, a personality weakness to be deplored or a welfare problem to be handled as cheaply as possible.”

Those words were written half a century ago. While the stigma against mental illness is slowly fading, while 81% of Canadians believe depression is a life-threatening illness, 45% of us also believe that if someone at work is dealing with depression and missed work as a result, they'd be more likely to “get into trouble and maybe even fired.”

To put this prejudice a different way, you still don't see many corporate titans putting their names on the psychiatric wings of hospitals or on community based housing for people living with a mental illness.

It's for this reason that the Commission is launching a major, national 10-year anti-stigma and discrimination reduction campaign. This campaign will be the largest systematic effort to reduce the stigma of mental illness in Canadian history. It is much-needed and long overdue.

Just ask your children. 70% of teenagers who feel anxious or depressed say they would have a hard time talking to anyone about it. It's little wonder that only one in six children and youth who have a mental illness in Canada get the help they need.

Mental illness often ruins individual's lives and destroys families.

But it also takes a terrible toll on businesses, and because of this, on the nation as a whole. Few of us realize just how large the cost in productivity is, and what an impediment it places on our productivity, our competitiveness and our economic security.

Until a few years ago, the connection between mental health and productivity was either out-rightly ignored or just barely glossed over. What do mental illnesses ranging from depression to substance abuse have to do with global competition? What does mental health have to do with fiscal health?

I'm here to tell you that it is plenty -- though you wouldn't know it by reading the tide of recent reports about Canada's lagging productivity.

The Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity noted that Canada lags behind America by a dispiriting \$9,200 per citizen – that is a huge prosperity gap . Other reports from StatsCan, the Bank of Canada and the Canadian banks all comment in depth on the mediocrity of our output per worker. Their urgent tone is fuelled by the reality that Canada no longer competes in a brawn-based world, but a brain-based one. Some 85% of the new jobs coming on stream demand cerebral and not manual skills. In other words, the capacity to think, concentrate and innovate is now critical. As the CEO of one steel company put it, “it's the brains, not the backs, of my people that do the heavy lifting for my company.”

Today's economy has produced a new and costly convergence – the rise of the brain-based economy at the same time that mental disorders are becoming recognized as the principal cause of disability in our workforce. Certainly, mental illness is a healthcare cost we pay for with our taxes. But more and more, it is a business cost. In Canada the economic loss in productivity due to mental illness is \$33 billion a year, a figure equal to approximately 15% of all the corporate profits in all Canadian businesses taken together, and 3% of the country's national debt.

According to the Toronto-based Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, depression alone represents 75% of long-term disability and 40% of short-term disability. The Roundtable predicts that disability insurance and group health claims related to mental illness claims will reach 60% of the total number of claims administered through business-employee plans.

Watson Wyatt Worldwide found that 58% of company managers say that mental health problems are their number one concern. One example – today, 30% of the drugs prescribed for Canada Post employees are stress and depression-related.

It's even worse in the office towers where so many of us work.

We've all had to deal with counting on someone who let us down by not showing up, not getting the job done, not performing up to snuff because they partied too hard the night before, stressed out or just "lost it". Was it copping out, incompetence – or some form of mental illness that forced them to drop the ball? Did the person have a character flaw – or did they suffer from some form of mental illness?

Mental health is a political issue. As a country, we have dropped the ball in taking care of our mentally ill.

Mental health is a social issue. To what extent are we responsible for those who cannot take care of themselves?

Mental health is a healthcare issue. What are we doing – what should we be doing, and what can we be doing to care for those that need help?

Mental health is an economic issue. What is the cost of helping those that need help?

Mental health is a business issue. What is the cost of lost productivity, lost brainpower, lost creativity – of people not working up to their full capability?

The arguments that mental illness in your business is a huge and growing drag on labour productivity are undeniable. According to Bill Wilkerson, the CEO of the Global Business Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, companies that improve the detection and treatment rates for their employees can save at least \$10,000 per employee per year.

So how can we do that?

One obvious way, is to start paying much closer attention to the role that mental health plays in the workplace. More importantly, is to start doing something about it.

The government can help, and I must commend the Federal Government for establishing the Commission. It's clear from this and from their additional funding of \$110 million in this year's federal budget to fund research projects on homelessness and the mentally ill that this government is seriously committed to doing something about mental illness.

But we can't expect governments to do everything. We can't look to Ottawa or Queen's Park or City Hall to solve a problem this pervasive.

We have to take a stand. We have to accept responsibility. We have to accept that if we want to make a difference, we have to make it happen.

Here is where I bridge two worlds -- We – the business community, has a stake in the future of our country.

What has to happen is that business – must step up to the plate.

The good news is that Canadian business and business organizations like the Board of Trade, have to come to the table.

We – the Mental Health Commission of Canada continues to need your support to make this happen.

Conquering mental illness and its stigma requires a national strategy and a nation's response.

It is a challenge. It is a huge challenge. Anyone who has been close to someone with a mental illness – knows how frustrating it can be to try to help. The temptation to throw up your hands and say: "I don't know what to do." Or "it's their problem, let them deal with it!"

Well, it's not just their problem – it's our problem, and there is something you can do.

I know there is a multitude of worthwhile causes asking you to invest your time, money and spirit.

But I would encourage you to consider putting some of your time and skills to the cause of mental health in Canada. Mental health is the foundation of total health!

A healthy workforce – a mentally healthy workforce – can tackle creativity, productivity, and the challenges we face and will continue to face as a nation.

Working to support Mental health – leading to total health – is something that each and every one of you can work towards.

There's no better place to start than improving the single most powerful factor in reducing productivity.

I ask you to join together to create the momentum that the mental health field has simply never seen in Canada. Begin by creating a new sense of compassion for those who suffer from mental illness and a new understanding of the unacceptable losses in terms of productivity and quality of work and life.

It's clear that Canadians are beginning to recognize the terrible personal and corporate costs of mental illness. I believe we are also ready to take the next step and to help those millions of Canadians who are living with mental illness and who will respond to our help.

I know that you understand and appreciate the impact, the cost and the ultimate ramifications of mental illness on our ability to succeed in business.

I also know that you understand and appreciate the benefits of doing what you can – individually and corporately – to make the difference in the lives of individuals dealing with mental illness, and ultimately, the difference to our country as a whole.

There is a strong and compelling business case for making our workplaces more mental health friendly.

That kind of workplace will have an enormous economic impact both on the economy as a whole and for every individual business that promotes the mental health of its workforce.

I ask you now to make that commitment to make a difference. Make mental health in the workplace the business of business.

Thank you.