



Calgary, March 6, 2009

Douglas Kelly, Editor-in-Chief; Stephen Meurice, Deputy Editor;
Jonathan Harris, Executive Editor; Jonathan Kay, Managing Editor, Comment
National Post
1450 Don Mills Road, Suite 300
Don Mills, ON M3B 3R5

Dear National Post Editors:

I am writing to you regarding the column that ran in the National Post on February 17 entitled "Hiding the facts about mental illness" by Colby Cosh. I am not writing to deny that anyone, with or without a mental illness, is capable of an act of violence. The truth is, however, that the vast majority of individuals with a mental problem or illness will never commit a violent act. In fact, when looking at the main predictors of violent behaviour, substance abuse, past experience of violence and time spent in an environment conducive to violence are most important. Age and gender are also major predictors. Most violent crime is committed by 18-26 year old males, and alcohol and other substance abuse play a key role. Much of this information is included in the psychiatry journal article cited by Mr. Cosh in his column. When the full picture is not included, the public misperception of the link between mental illness and violence increases.

Consider this fact: One in four or five Canadians will experience some form of mental or emotional health problem this year alone. That means this column is painting nearly eight million Canadians as potentially violent. Here's another fact to consider: Three quarters of people experiencing a mental health problem won't seek any form of treatment to help them recover. Why? A key reason they repeatedly cite is their fear of being labelled, stigmatized or viewed as potentially dangerous and unpredictable. So the very people who could benefit from treatment don't seek it out and therefore don't get the help they need to recover.

Stigma and discrimination experienced by people living with mental illness are the primary reasons why the Federal Government created the Mental Health Commission of Canada a year and a half ago. We are at the beginning stages of a ten-year Anti-stigma

and Anti-discrimination Initiative. We want to change attitudes in this country so no parent will be ashamed to tell their friends their child is getting help for a mental health problem; so workers won't be afraid to let colleagues know they're depressed; and so journalists will adhere to a code of conduct for responsible reporting and never use stigmatizing words like "lunatic".

Columns like the one by Colby Cosh contribute to the stigma experienced by people with mental health problems. In the end, we are all affected. We call on your professionalism to eliminate incorrect and harmful information.

Respectfully,

Michael Howlett
President and CEO, Mental Health Commission of Canada