



Speaking notes for

The Honourable Michael Kirby

Chair

Mental Health Commission of Canada

**at the ceremony to launch the
York University Psychology Clinic**

Toronto, Ontario

November 4, 2009

Thank you very much, and good morning everyone.

This is a landmark day for York University and its Faculty of Health and Department of Psychology.

Everyone involved in making the York University Psychology Clinic a reality can be very proud of this great achievement.

You should be looking forward with confidence and great optimism to what you'll be achieving here, and the positive impact you'll have on the lives of people living with mental illness.

Your work will have a ripple effect.

The people with mental illnesses who receive advice and care here...the graduate students and community-based practitioners who train here...and the work you're doing to expand the frontiers of knowledge about mental health disorders – all of this has the potential to benefit all Canadians.

Canada faces an enormous mental health challenge.

This year alone, more than seven million Canadians will experience a mental illness. That's one in five people; and that person could be – a friend; a colleague at here at the university; a neighbour; a loved one.

No other illness has such an impact. We know, for instance, that one in two people will experience a mental health issue of some degree at least once in their lifetime.

It's sad to say, but many of these people won't get help because they can't access services.

There simply aren't enough places that people with mental health issues can go to get the help they need, and this dearth of services is everywhere – in our towns and cities; in our schools; in our hospitals; in our workplaces; in our Aboriginal communities; in our seniors communities; and in our justice institutions.

There also aren't enough mental health providers working in our system. This too is unfortunate, because having access to psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses and other health professionals can make all the difference to the well-being of people living with mental illness.

That's why this clinic is so important. You're benefiting the local community with the services you provide; and, as a training centre, your graduates and researchers have the potential to have a positive impact on the lives of all Canadians.

This clinic and others like it are helping to bring Canada another step closer to having an integrated mental health system that places people living with mental illness at its centre.

The Mental Health Commission's primary goal is to create just such an integrated mental health system in this country, and today I'd like to take this opportunity to tell you about the progress we're making and the role every Canadian can play to take mental illness "out of the shadows—forever".

Commission background

The Mental Health Commission grew out of the most extensive consultations on mental health and mental illness ever conducted in this country.

The consultations formed the basis of a report by the Senate Social Affairs Committee, which I chaired, called “Out of the Shadows at Last”. It was released in May 2006.

The report looked at mental illness from the perspective of both the mental health system and the overall healthcare system in Canada.

The need for such a report was obvious.

Canada is the only G8 country that doesn’t have a national mental health strategy. The only one!

Without such a strategy, efforts to help people affected by mental illness have been largely fragmented and ineffective.

Our work began in September 2007, when the federal government formed the Commission – the first time the federal government had taken such major and enduring action to address mental health across the country.

The Commission is a non-profit organization and, while we are not a service provider, we are a catalyst with a mandate to focus national attention on mental health. The Commission is funded by the federal government, but operates at arm’s length from the government. It has the support of all provincial and territorial governments except Quebec.

The Commission now has four key initiatives on the go:

- We’re creating the first national mental health strategy for Canada.
- We recently launched a 10-year anti-stigma / anti-discrimination initiative, which we’re calling ‘Opening Minds’. It’s the most extensive effort of its kind undertaken in Canadian history.
- We’re conducting the largest research project of its kind in the world – studying mental health and homelessness. As part of this study, more than 1,300 homeless mentally ill people will receive housing and support services.
- And we’ll be establishing a Knowledge Exchange Centre, a web-based resource to provide the general public with reliable information, and provide researchers, academics and scientists a facility to exchange information.

Another objective for us is the ‘Stand in the Light: Partners for Mental Health’ program, a national network of people dedicated to improving mental health services and supports in Canada. It will be launched in the first quarter of next year.

I’d now like to briefly update you on some of these key initiatives.

National mental-health strategy

The Commission has developed a comprehensive framework for a national mental-health strategy focused around the dual notions of “hope” and “recovery”.

Contrary to a popular misconception surrounding mental illness, recovery is possible for the vast majority of people who live with mental illness. They can become functioning citizens and family members. They can lead full and rich lives within the limitations imposed by their illness, just as people live with asthma, diabetes or epilepsy.

The Commission is now in the process of finalizing its vision for what a transformed mental-health system in Canada should look like. It will be released publicly later this fall.

We've conducted extensive public consultations on this vision – visiting 13 cities across Canada and meeting with a wide cross-section of stakeholders. More than 1,700 Canadians also participated in an online consultation.

Participants endorsed our vision, while also contributing commentary to help strengthen it.

The strategy will be transformative. It will be designed to provide a genuine mental health care system for every man, woman and child in Canada – one that puts people living with mental illness at its centre; one that has a clear focus on their ability to recover; and one that promotes the mental health and wellbeing of everyone living in Canada.

The strategy will help make Canada a society in which people living with mental health problems can participate in the community to the full extent of their abilities and in which they receive timely access to quality services, regardless of where they live.

Now that we have a vision that tells us what needs to be done, the next big job is determining *how* we are going to implement this complex strategy, recognizing the reality of Canadian federalism and the fact that the delivery of publicly funded health care is a provincial / territorial responsibility. Any national strategy must be tailored to that reality.

We'll spend the next two years developing specific detailed recommendations on *how* to implement our vision of a transformed mental health system.

Opening Minds (Anti-stigma / Anti-discrimination Initiative)

As I mentioned earlier, many people with a mental illness won't get help because they can't access services.

Another major reason they don't seek help is that they're too ashamed or afraid to come forward because of the stigma associated with mental illness.

People living with a mental illness have the right to be treated with the same dignity and respect as we accord everyone struggling to recover from any form of illness.

To achieve that, we need to eliminate the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness.

Last month, the Commission officially launched a very important new national initiative – our 10-year anti-stigma / anti-discrimination campaign.

The name of the initiative is *Opening Minds*, and it is by far the largest effort ever made in Canada to deal with the issue of the stigma and discrimination faced by individuals living with a mental illness or mental health problem.

Stigma and discrimination exact a huge personal toll on people living with mental illness. During the Senate Committee consultation, they told us that the stigma and discrimination they face from the people closest to them – particularly family, friends and co-workers – is often much worse than the impact of the illness itself.

People with mental health issues even burden *themselves* with self-stigma arising from their own fears and misconceptions.

Stigma remains one of the major barriers preventing people living with a mental illness from talking about their illness...from seeking help...and from receiving treatment. One study shows that almost 40 per cent of parents would be embarrassed to tell anyone about their children's

mental health issues. If that's the case, how many of the children of those parents will get the help they need?

By eliminating stigma and fear of discrimination, our *Opening Minds* initiative offers every Canadian living with mental illness real hope and raises the potential for treatment and recovery.

Through face-to-face communication programs and public awareness campaigns, *Opening Minds* is targeting two groups initially:

- youth aged 12 to 18; and
- health-care providers on the medical front lines.

Opening Minds is focusing on youth because 70% of mental illnesses in adults have their onset during adolescence or childhood and 70% of childhood cases of mental health problems can be solved through early diagnosis and interventions. Not controlled; not managed; but solved.¹

And yet, two-thirds of youth say that fear, embarrassment, peer pressure and stigma are major barriers to them seeking help.

Opening Minds is also focusing on health-care providers because – and this was a real surprise to me when I heard about it during our Senate Committee hearings – some health care workers have the same attitudes towards individuals with mental illnesses as the average Canadian does.

Anecdotally, we've learned that mental health patients don't feel treated with respect and dignity by health care providers. They're sent to the back of the line in emergency departments, even if they're in serious distress, because physical ailments are seen to take precedence over mental ones.

In its second year, *Opening Minds* will broaden its focus to include the Canadian workforce. And after that, we'll broaden *Opening Minds* still further to include: seniors; First Nations, Métis and Inuit; and other audiences.

Workforce mental health

The workforce is a priority because we believe it's in the interest of all organizations to address stigma and discrimination and improve the mental health of their employees.

One out of every four to five employees is affected by mental health issues every year. That's 20-25% of our labour force; and it's important to keep in mind that in addition to those individuals, their families are also affected.

In addition to the human impact, the economic price tag of mental illness in the workplace is staggering – costing the Canadian economy an estimated \$33 billion a year. (That is a snapshot taken before the economic recession took hold. We can only imagine how much that cost has increased because of the stresses placed on those who have lost jobs, those waiting for the axe to fall.)

According to a recent survey of 450 Canadian organizations, mental illness results in 35 million workdays lost every year in Canada, and yet the same survey showed that only 13% of senior executives have a strong awareness of the impact of mental health on their organizations.²

¹ *Reaching for the Top*, Health Canada, Report by the Advisor on Healthy Children & Youth, 2008 by Dr. K. Kellie Leitch, Chair / Chief, Division of Paediatric Surgery, Children's Hospital, London, Ontario.

How could it not be in the interest of all organizations to improve the mental health of their employees? Greater employee sustainability means greater organizational and business sustainability – a very important consideration at any time but particularly in these troubled economic times.

The Commission’s Workforce Advisory Committee is developing a plan to ensure that key organizational personnel make mental health in their own workforces a priority.

The idea is to help all workforce leaders change the way mental health is dealt with so that workforce environments are more capable of dealing with mental health matters in a manner that leads to the betterment of the workforce and the workplace.

Stand in the Light: Partners for Mental Health

Last and by no means least, the Mental Health Commission is laying the groundwork for a national mental health social movement in Canada because to really succeed in changing the mental health system we will need grassroots support of Canadians from all walks of life. We’re calling it Stand in the Light: Partners for Mental Health.

The Commission has started the process of launching this social movement – to recruit an army of people from every part of the country.

Members of this army of volunteers will be known as *Partners for Mental Health* – a national network of people dedicated to improving mental health services and supports in Canada and determined to shine the spotlight on mental health issues.

The members of *Partners for Mental Health* will play an important role in creating the political will to support and implement the national mental health strategy.

We hope *Partners for Mental Health* will be as successful as the movements for AIDS and breast cancer have been – with education campaigns, advocacy, fund raising events, volunteering in health organizations, and getting people to talk about their experiences.

Conclusion

We need everyone here today to help us implement our vision, and to improve mental health services for all Canadians.

The first thing you can do is to tell your friends and neighbours how important it is that mental health services – and access to services – be improved. Tell them about the crisis, educate them and try to arouse their emotions about the cause.

The second thing you can do is support the York University Psychology Clinic. It’s important that as many people as possible – even those who may not have the economic means to – are able to access the mental health care the clinic has to offer. It’s important that we get more well-trained psychologists into the Canadian mental health system. And it’s important for the clinic to continue its research into the most effective forms of psychotherapy and anxiety.

The third thing you can do is join our national mental health movement when it’s launched.

The Commission can be a catalyst.

² The survey was conducted by Mercer in conjunction with The Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health (CAMIMH) and released in July 2008 – <http://www.mercer.ca/summary.htm?siteLanguage=1009&idContent=1313345&eu=null>.

But only you and everyone working together can give Canadians living with mental illness real hope...real support...and real solutions for treatment and recovery.

I'm very optimistic that we'll succeed.

I wish the York University Psychology Clinic – and everyone involved with it – the greatest of success.