

Putting the spotlight on mental health stigma in BC emergency rooms

By Jen Jensen

Niki Hylins tried for months to explain to her boyfriend how unhappy and hopeless she felt, but the conversations kept failing. He finally got it when she showed him a dark self-portrait she'd drawn and he cried.

"He said he didn't know that this was what I was going through and he apologized for the lack of caring on his part," says Hylins who lives in Penticton, B.C.

Art was a refuge from a turmoil that swirled within her. At times she suffered from depression, or was incredibly restless. During those restless, manic phases, she moved from job to job, and from place to place, travelling the world in hopes of finding something, anything to end the profound sadness.

Hylins realized something was very wrong with her, so she repeatedly sought help from doctors. She was constantly misdiagnosed and often prescribed the wrong medications, which caused her mental health to plunge to frighteningly new lows.

Now 37, Hylins recalls visiting one doctor years ago who was noticeably uncomfortable.

"She actually kind of chuckled when I talked about my experiences. She wrote out yet another prescription for something and didn't say a word. Not one. No advice, no comment on what was happening to me, nothing."

Hylins believes that particular doctor and many of the others she saw had a stigma towards patients with mental illness. That stigma was not only unhelpful but also worsened her own self-perception.

The stigma held by health care workers is an issue slowly being identified by the medical profession itself.

In 26 years of nursing in several hospital emergency rooms (ERs), Cheryl Whittleton has seen plenty of examples.

"Physicians or even nurses would say 'this client is going to take half an hour so let's do the people with the sore throats and stitches first'," says Whittleton, now Team Leader of Emergency at BC's Castlegar and District Health Centre. Even though the client with the mental health issue had a higher triage level, he or she was put on the backburner.

Another incident involved a long-time friend who came into an ER one night where she was working. The woman had a mental illness and Whittleton overheard staff speaking inappropriately and dismissing her needs. She explained her friend's illness to her colleagues and the woman was admitted. Had she not spoken up, Whittleton believes her friend would have been discharged without treatment.

Whittleton thought ERs in the Interior could benefit from more awareness about the issue, so she brought it up at a committee meeting, and everyone agreed.

At around the same time, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) was looking for proposals from projects across Canada already addressing stigma among health care workers. The MHCC's Opening Minds program is a ten year anti-stigma/anti-discrimination Initiative that has chosen health care professionals as one of its initial target groups. The organization says it is on the medical front lines where people feel they experience some of the most deeply felt stigma and discrimination.

Opening Minds is partnering with and conducting evaluations of about 49 programs across the country designed to reduce stigma. It will then take the best programs and roll them out across the country.

Opening Minds also identified sites offering to serve as pilot projects, and brought them together with existing programs. When Whittleton saw the presentation about a program piloted last year by Ontario's Central Local Health Integration Network from north of Toronto, which had proven to be successful at reducing stigma among health care providers, she realized it could work in her area. She also realized something about herself.

"I think I'm a good nurse," she says, "but I saw in myself some of the things that were discussed in that workshop and I was ashamed. I recognized that it's my job to advocate for patients and to be more mindful of the terms I use when treating them."

With Opening Minds bringing the two health regions together, and help from the



BC Artist Niki Hylins at the Penticton Art Gallery where she and her students showcased a series of self-portraits.
Photo Credit: Colin Scott

Interior Health Authority, Whittleton facilitated a series of workshops this fall identical to the Ontario program. They were held at seven interior hospitals and community clinics in B.C., including in Castlegar, Kelowna, Williams Lake, Kamloops, Penticton, Salmon Arm and Cranbrook, and attended by dozens of emergency department workers who heard first-hand how stigma can affect patients. Whittleton asked Niki Hylins if she would help.

"It was really hard to tell my story over and over," says Hylins, who did just that at each of the workshops.

She explained to her audiences how she believed stigma prevented her from getting properly diagnosed and treated during her 22 years of symptoms. She also told them how that lack of care ultimately forced her on a blind search to help herself. Hylins spent hours on the internet researching her symptoms and discovered she had the same ones experienced in bipolar disorder. A psychiatrist confirmed she was right.

Hylins says it's now important to her to try to educate health workers about the impact they can have. "Stigma within the health care system has a powerfully harmful effect;" she says, and on the flip side, intelligent, caring treatment can have a positive effect on patients, "that is immeasurably more powerful."

Whittleton says Hylins' message had a significant impact at the workshops. "The majority of participants felt that her presentation was very powerful and it brought some to tears," she says.

The participants were surveyed following the workshop and asked a series of questions about its usefulness. When asked, "Do you think this type of workshop is useful in reducing prejudice and discrimination against people with persistent mental illness," one participant wrote: "Yes, I think this workshop is necessary, important and a very big step in the right direction."

Whittleton says she is grateful that the MHCC chose to work with her to bring about awareness in central B.C.

Today, Hylins says the medical profession, which so often failed her, is now saving her life by giving her the tools she needs to treat her illness.

Her restlessness is now well-managed and she's focused on a new venture called Okanagan Creative Connections, where she teaches fine art classes with therapeutic aspects incorporated into the lessons. Most of her students suffer from mental illness and it was for them that she started her business.

"My goal is to improve their quality of life and empower them to create through innovative instruction, mentoring and self-expression."

In October, the Penticton art gallery hosted a psychiatric art show featuring 30 works from the classes.

Her life is now full – and busy. In addition to her classes, she sells art, works on engaging her community in mental wellness creative projects and, along with her husband, is raising their two small children. Hylins says she hasn't had much time lately to create art for her own self-expression. When she does, however, she expects that whatever she draws, paints or sculpts will no longer bring people to tears. She's hoping they will see instead the joy that she's experiencing now.