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Health/corrections

Ex-inmate complains about meds being stopped while in jail

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Randy Rose says he knew there was "something wrong" with him since he was 16 years old - he just didn't know what.

A native of Georgetown, Rose, 35, would have episodes of hyperactivity, followed by periods of extreme depression, with mood swings in between.

"I knew something was wrong. I started asking doctors to help me find out what it was when I was around 28, but no one could help me," he said.

Rose's bouts of depression were often severe, and became worse when his mother died about two years ago.

He has numerous scars on his arms from attempts to end his life, and he has permanent damage to his intestines, after he swallowed 21 razor blades in an effort to kill himself.

Charges laid

Unfortunately, Rose's hyper periods were just as destructive, often resulting in him facing charges of assault, robbery, property damage or disturbing the peace.

"I used to flip out and say really bad things to people," he said. "After a while, I got sick and tired of hurting people and abusing them like that."

Karen Noel, Rose's girlfriend for the past four years, says Rose's ups and downs were hard on her, too.

"He'd get so hyper. Then, as he'd slow down, the depression would set in and he'd get suicidal," she explained.

"I think he was trying to reach out, but he didn't know what he was reaching out for. He'd say some pretty bad things to me, but I knew it wasn't really him talking."

Noel said she realized Rose needed medical attention and was willing to go to any length to get it for him. That's why, she said, after Rose shoved her during a fight, she called the police and had him charged with assault.

Rose was convicted and sentenced to time in Her Majesty's Penitentiary in St. John's, which he served.

Noel, however, wasn't satisfied her boyfriend had received the medical attention he required.

It was for that reason, when Rose was released and shoved her again during another argument, Noel pressed charges a second time.

While Rose awaited his court date on the charge, his family doctor referred him to the Start Clinic at St. Clare's Mercy Hospital - a clinic providing quick access to patients requiring urgent mental-health care. It was through the clinic that Rose was referred to a psychiatrist for long-term care.

The psychiatrist diagnosed Rose with bipolar disorder. Also called manic depression, the illness is characterized by severe changes in mood, including episodes of mania alternating with periods of depression.

Rose said once he began taking the medications prescribed to him, he felt better.

"I felt like my nightmare was over," he said. "I was calmer almost right away."

Rose said when he appeared in court more than a month later, the judge recognized the progress he was making and acknowledged his previously undiagnosed illness was likely a significant cause of his behaviour. He was sentenced to 28 days in jail.

But once incarcerated, Rose said he was taken off his medications immediately, and wasn't told why.

Within a couple of days, he felt his condition was deteriorating and he began getting agitated, stressed out and depressed.

Noel said she phoned the penitentiary and asked what was going on.

"I spoke to the nurse and she said they didn't feel he needed (the medications)," Noel said.

"They said the medications were making him sleep, and they couldn't tell if he was using other drugs or not.

"I called (Rose's psychiatrist), but he said he couldn't override the doctor inside the pen, who makes his own assessments.

"He had been doing so well, but all the work he did meant absolutely nothing - he was back at Square 1. Who's the victim here? It wasn't only Randy suffering - it was me and his family, too.

"To me, it's like he got sentenced twice - once by the judge, and once when they took away his medications." When contacted, the province's director of adult corrections, Marvin McNutt, said the Department of Justice has an agreement with Eastern Health to have psychiatric services supplied to correctional institutions.

Seen by nurse

If an inmate is brought to the penitentiary and has never been in custody before, he is seen first by a nurse, who will record his general health history and do an assessment. If necessary, the inmate will be referred to a physician, who can make a referral to psychiatrist Dr. David Craig.

Craig is the psychiatrist in charge at the province's correctional facilities.

"As you can imagine, it's a very demanding job, since there is a disproportionately high rate of inmates with mental-health issues, and there are pressures to prescribe certain

medications," explained McNutt. "He uses his own professional judgment - we do not dictate anything to him."

If it is known that an inmate was being treated by a psychiatrist in the community, contact is made with that doctor, McNutt said.

If an inmate wishes to make a complaint about their treatment, he added, they can do so through the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

Geoff Chaulk of the local chapter of the Canadian Mental Health Association said he is aware that medications being taken away is a problem for many inmates.

He said he would hope inmates receive a quality of mental health care comparable to what they would receive in the community.

"In any setting where there is treatment for mental illness, whether it be in a correctional facility or a hospital, we would hope the position of the physician who cared for (the patient) in the community would be taken into consideration," he said.

"We would also expect, if the approach was to take someone off their medications, that it would be done in accordance with appropriate clinical practices, and there would be some sort of monitoring in place, since patients in withdrawal can get worse very quickly."

As for Rose, once he served his time at the pen and was released, he went back to his original psychiatrist, who prescribed his medications.

Since that time, he said, he has been doing well and has had no further trouble with the law.

"I know the consequences of not taking my medication," he said.

Rose participates in therapy sessions, as well as sessions with the pastoral care representatives at the Health Sciences Centre. He is a member of a Christian group and hopes to attend school in the fall, where he'll take up reading and

writing and classes in art and upholstery.

He's also concentrating on being a good father to his 22-month-old daughter, Angela, and regaining contact with his 15-year-old daughter, Brittany.

"It doesn't matter what illness you have - you can feel better and do anything once you have the right medication and treatment," he said.

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Illustration(s):

Randy Rose shows the medication he takes to control depression.

Randy Rose and his girlfriend Karen Noel are concerned about inmates not getting the proper medical care and medication while incarcerated.

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