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Slice of life

Riders Into Light

Cyclists raise awareness of stigma associated with mental illness

Geoff Chaulk

The Newfoundland and Labrador division of the Canadian Mental Health Association welcomed three determined Canadians to our fair city July 28.

Jan Nielson, Charlie Fox and Gerry Owen left Nanaimo, B.C., on May 1 on bicycles to raise awareness of the stigma that plagues people with mental illness. They called themselves Riders Into Light.

The cyclists are middle-aged or older - Charlie is 71 years of age and the driver of the mobile sleeping quarters, Ernie, is in his early 80s. All of the cyclists had been in training for a year getting ready for the journey. Two of the cyclists are retired - Jan worked for B.C. Hydro and Charlie was a probation officer. Gerry was the spokesman for the group and the one I had periodic contact with during the few weeks before their arrival. Gerry is a semi-retired lawyer.

Took on issue

The riders took on the issue of stigma following a discussion with a mental health service provider regarding homelessness and mental illness. In this country, it is estimated that between 30 and 40 per cent of homeless people have a mental illness and 20 to 25 per cent have a substance-abuse problem and a mental illness.

As everyone is aware, it is in our country's larger cities that the problem of homelessness is most visible. In our province, for many people with serious mental illness, it is more of an issue of poor quality or inappropriate housing as a result of being poor and reliant on social assistance. Some of our

citizens who have serious mental illness reside in a 1970s approach to "community care" in large boarding homes outside St. John's. Or some, regrettably, stay too long in the antiquated Waterford Hospital.

So, what is the connection between mental illness and stigma? Do the two add up to even greater challenges for people who are fighting serious illnesses and trying to live life as best they can? Well, from my own experience with mental illness, the connection is very real and the stigma is very alive. As an educated man who has had a successful 25-year career, I can only imagine (and shudder) as to the extent and impact of stigma on those much less fortunate than me and much more seriously ill.

I've recounted in this newspaper my most recent bout of illness and what it was like. As I was getting back on my feet, I was subjected to the oddest comments from seemingly educated people. One, in particular, was quite stunning.

Over the years, I have been somewhat resistant to taking medication in the longer term. With my recent bout of illness, my doctor was firm in her advice that I take my meds faithfully - that meant taking a drug called lithium. In my career as a mental health professional, I saw the introduction of lithium to a client's treatment plan as a sign that the illness was serious. I shared with a colleague the details of my medication regime and the response was emphatic. I shouldn't take lithium and, instead, I should go see her naturopath. I trust she doesn't tell people with diabetes not to take insulin.

On another occasion, I had a discussion with a mental health professional who was of the opinion that people are able to manipulate their doctors and psychiatrists by feigning illness in order to go on disability insurance so as to have some time off. Well, from my experience, neither of my doctors would be that easily duped and given the mental state I was in, I don't think duping anyone would have been within my realm of abilities. In fact, I tried to pretend I was better than I really was, only to be outmaneuvered by an astute doctor.

So, is what I have described stigma? When I looked up the

word stigma in the dictionary, it led to me looking up several words and I realized that stigma is really quite complex and sometimes even subtle. At its core, stigma means a brand or mark of disgrace, resulting in reproach or discredit - unpleasant, indeed.

In the report on mental illness, mental health and addiction in Canada, Senator Michael Kirby and his colleagues call on the federal government to, among other things, fund a national anti-stigma campaign that will potentially cover a 10-year timeframe. It seems that as a result of the Senators' cross-country hearings, the need to address stigma was painfully obvious.

However, with increased awareness, education and advocacy, things are changing. Under our current government there has been an increase to social assistance rates and upcoming access to home-support services to people with serious mental illness. These are important public policy changes that should make the lives of those with serious mental illness better.

For many of us, there is also great support from friends, family and co-workers, which helps greatly in living with a mental illness. We also, periodically, get a great boost from strangers like Gerry, Charlie and Jan, who out of the goodness of their hearts are trying to make a difference.

We held a small welcome reception for the cyclists and gave them memento gift bags. One of the gifts was a dinner at Ches's. Before leaving Nanaimo, a friend told the cyclists to make sure they went to Ches's for dinner. Small world.

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