

The Telegram (St. John's)

News, Monday, April 26, 2004, p. A1 / Front

Wealth of experience: New director combines personal, professional background

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Special to The Telegram

One in five people will experience a mental illness at some point in their lives. Geoff Chaulk joined that statistic over two decades ago while working as a young social worker.

Today, Chaulk is the new face of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Newfoundland and Labrador Division. He succeeds Moyra Buchan who retired as CMHA executive director in March, having served in the position for over 15 years.

Chaulk was providing social work services on the in-patient psychiatric service at the S.A. Grace Hospital when first symptoms of depression surfaced in the early 1980s. He suspected he was being hit with an illness that plagued many of his patients.

'DIFFICULT EXPERIENCE'

"It was a very difficult experience for me because I was a young social worker working on an inpatient psychiatric service at the time. It was my first paid job after graduation. I kind of knew I wasn't as on as I would normally be in my thinking and my interactions with people. But it took me a while to figure out what was going on."

Because of the potential impact related to the stigma of having a mental illness, Chaulk opted to confide in a trusted family doctor rather than one of the psychiatrists he was working closely with at the hospital.

"This doctor was the father of a couple of guys I went to school with. He was very good to me, very kind. And he told me, yes, I was right, that I had become depressed and that's why my sleep was so disturbed and my appetite was off and

I'd become very anxious."

Chaulk was put on medication popular in the 1980s. However, he had trouble with the drug's side effects. It took him some time to find the right medication that helped him feel more like his old self. In the meantime, he kept his illness from family and friends.

"I didn't share it with anyone. My parents, who were very good to me, we were very close, didn't even know. I felt it would worry people and it was that social taboo where I might get, 'OK, just pull up your boot straps, make the best of it and move on.'"

With the help of medication, Chaulk has gone on to make great inroads in the field of mental health on the national scene.

He is confident his lengthy experience both as an advocate and a client of mental-health services have laid the groundwork needed to face the challenges he'll encounter in his new position.

He holds a bachelor of social work from Memorial University and a master's of social work from McGill University.

The early years of his social work career were spent providing mental-health services at the Waterford and Grace Hospitals in St. John's as well as the renowned Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in Toronto.

For the last 15 years he's worked for the Ontario Public Service as a senior policy and program consultant in the areas of mental-health reform, physician services and primary care renewal. His area of interest and expertise include public education in relation to mental illness, homelessness and mental illness, consumer self-help and employment, supported housing and an inter-disciplinary approach to primary care.

During his time with Ontario's Public Health Service, Chaulk spearheaded the province's mental-health reform strategy, which suited well his aspirations to work in social policy related to mental health.

"That was right up my alley because it was all about enhancing the community-based service structure for people with severe and persistent mental illness so that they can be less reliant on institutional care."

Chaulk believes institutional care for mentally unstable individuals is great when it's needed. However, with community supports, he feels many people living with a mental illness can do quite well leading productive and better quality lives outside a hospital setting.

His work with the Ontario government also included research and policy initiatives in the area of homelessness and mental illness -- another area that's been of interest to him for years.

As is the case of many people living with a mental illness, repeat occurrences aren't unusual. Chaulk was on a medical leave of absence from his position in Ontario last year when he moved home to be closer to family and friends. He looked at the move as an important part of his treatment plan.

"One of my best friends, Lynn Murphy, was prodding me to make this decision, so at 45 it was, 'If I'm going to do it I have to do it now,'" he says of making the permanent move home.

Ironically, the theme of this year's Mental Health Week which runs from May 3-9 is Making Connections, which is exactly what Chaulk is now doing -- both on and off the job.

"In my own recovery I'm making connections that are all about being back and being reconnected with my family. My parents are still alive, which is a blessing, and I have an extended family and a number of very good friends. So, all of this for me is about the support I get from them and I hope that they get from me."

Once back home and on a treatment regime that's working for him, Chaulk began thinking about his next career move, his enthusiasm backed with two decades of experience in the field of mental health.

"I knew I wanted to take the skills I'd acquired over the years in government and apply them to a community-based agency, and I wondered what was going on at Canadian Mental Health Association, Newfoundland and Labrador."

After going through a rigorous competition including presentations to the CMHA board, Chaulk was offered and eagerly accepted the job.

As he settles into his new position as CMHA executive director, he is becoming familiar with the provincial government's mental health strategy, which he sees as having a number of strengths, including an interdisciplinary approach to mental-health services at the primary-care level.

"Physicians can be very burdened and that's one of the reasons why a multidisciplinary team is so important for the future health care of the country."

In many respects, Chaulk feels that this new job is giving him an opportunity to live some of his other dreams. Everyone needs to strive for good mental health, he says.

"And for some of us that may have experienced a loss of good mental health, as you start to regain it, you realize just how valuable it is. And for those who have not gone down that road, we will also advocate how to keep good mental health."

In its recent budget the provincial government allocated \$1 million for mental-health services. In working with government, CMHA will play a role in ensuring clients of mental-health services have access to the services they need through the various mental-health professionals who deliver those services. It will also work closely with its counterparts across the country in the areas of mental health research, development and policy planning. Closer to home, he says, the local board, staff and volunteers with the CMHA are second to none.

"The year ahead will be an interesting one for us," he says enthusiastically.

"There has been amazing work done by the division in

advocacy and an incredible amount of work done in relation to the Reid and Power Inquiry. I'm very grateful for the opportunity I've been given to build on our strengths. And I'm ready to rise to the challenges ahead."

Illustration(s):

Color Photo: Geoff Chaulk is shown with local staffers (from left) Michelle Denine, Carol Anne Hookey and Chris Morrissey.

Category: News

Uniform subject(s): Psychology and human behavior

Story type(s): News

Edition: Final

Length: Long, 966 words

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Doc. : news·20040426·ET·0SJT20040426083408_FMS0006