



CANADIAN COALITION FOR SENIORS' MENTAL HEALTH

POSITION PAPER: MENTAL HEALTH AND THE HOME CARE SECTOR May 2004

Overview:

Though it is known that Seniors constitute one of the fastest growing population groups in Canada, there unfortunately remains a serious lack of information, policy and initiative to advancing opportunities to improve and to promote the mental health of those over the age of 65. Consider the following facts on seniors and seniors' mental health in Canada:

- In 1998, there were an estimated 3.7 million (12%) Canadians aged 65 and over. Statistics Canada has projected this number to be 16% by 2016, and 23% by 2041
- Seniors suffer from a wide array of mental illnesses including Mood, Anxiety and Psychotic Disorders and in addition, the emotional, behavioural and cognitive complications of a variety of brain diseases such as Alzheimer's Disease, Stroke and Parkinson's disease
- Depressed older adults are three to four times more likely to have alcohol-related problems than are older people who are not depressed
- Major depression affects approximately 2 to 4% of seniors living in the community compared to 8% of the general population. However, when milder depression symptoms are counted for seniors, the rate increases to between 10 and 15%
- Hospitalizations for major depressive and anxiety disorders increase after age 65
- The incidence of suicide is highest among men 80 years of age and older
- It is predicted that depression will become the second leading cause of death in Canada due to an aging population and social/economic factors

Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health (CCSMH)

The above statistics are no surprise to the over 70 organizations and 300 individuals who are members of the CCSMH. In fact, the CCSMH was established in 2002, with the mission "to *promote the mental health of seniors by connecting people, ideas and resources*". The goal of the CCSMH is to support collaborative initiatives that will facilitate positive mental health for seniors through advocacy, innovation and dissemination of best practices.

Seniors, Mental Health and Home Care: Identified Issues

Public Awareness / Prevention: There is a distinct lack of public awareness about seniors' mental health issues and a growing need for an understanding of early "signs" of mental illness, effective treatments, supportive resources and reduction of stigma. An increase in public awareness of signs of mental health problems may contribute to:

- early identification of mental health issues and therefore potentially decreasing the need for intervention at a crisis level and the number of hospitalizations and placement of seniors' in long term care facilities; increased opportunity for intervention in the community
- increased awareness of resources, treatment and supports available
- reduction of stigma associated with mental illness and mental health
- reduction in the economic burden of hospital costs associated with mental health, emergency and crisis services

Assessment and Treatment: Mental health is as important as physical health to daily living and is an integral part of health and wellness. Unfortunately, mental disorders among seniors are frequently misdiagnosed or missed altogether. Many individuals falsely believe that mental illness is a normal part of aging. Furthermore, challenges continue to exist in the areas of assessment and treatment, within the acute, long-term and community/home care sectors. Issues specific to community/ home care include:

- *Eligibility for home care services:* Service provisions primarily focus on physical needs of seniors. Variation exists by province and territories as to whether a senior is eligible for services based on their mental health needs (with or without physical needs).
- *Range of Proactive Services:* For those seniors who are eligible for home care service, there is a broad range of services available. Access often depends on staff resources, funding, and provincial models for care regardless of need. As well, services are often confusing to seniors (i.e. services available, how to access, potential costs). This is especially true of the rural population.
- *Assessment* of mental health is often missed or ignored due to co-existing physical conditions often found in the senior population.
- *Treatment:* Assistance with personal care activities is not generally considered to be a mental health service and is often unavailable to seniors' with mental health problems. As well, there is little encouragement to move outside of the medical model to include holistic care models.
- *Research and Best Practices:* There is a lack of research being conducted into best practices for seniors' mental health assessment, treatment and awareness in the community.
- *Services Integration:* Seniors mental health home care services must be comprehensive, coordinated and integrated with the rest of the health care system. There is an opportunity to introduce homecare functions as potential substitutions for hospitals and other health care facilities and to allow for maintenance, prevention and quality of life services for seniors in the community.
- *Diversity:* There continue to be challenges around recognizing and providing services to diverse communities (i.e. rural vs. urban, ethno-specific etc).

Caregiving: Caring for seniors is often a complex affair and family caregivers experience extraordinary levels of stress over long periods of time. Mental illness adds further burden for caregivers and an increased need to involve family members in the provision of care. A National Profile of Family Caregivers in Canada Report (2002) indicated that only 23% family caregivers are currently receiving some type of formal home care services. Current support in these areas is limited and varies in Canada. Outcomes for both seniors with mental illness and their caregivers may be improved if supportive education, resources and consultation over the long term are received.

Research and Reporting: Though there is research focused on mental health, homecare and seniors, there exists little research integrating the three topics. Without this information, it is increasingly difficult to create standards, and to promote best practices. An additional challenge is that existing research on mental health in Canada fails to adequately address seniors, and often excludes mental illness conditions related to dementia and delirium in definitions of mental health.

Education and Training: There is an urgent need to provide education and training to the numerous home care providers in the overlapping areas of mental health and senior care. This may pose challenges due to the variety of outsourcing that occurs through home care programs in Canada.

Advocacy / Policy / Accountability: Currently, each province and territory offers some form of home care, but there is no policy in place to ensure consistent and equitable access to services across Canada.

Furthermore, because home care is not considered “medically necessary” under the Canada Health Act, provisions remain small, there lacks standards, evaluation, accountability and adequate funding dedicated to home care consumers.

CCSMH Position and Recommendations

In line with the strategic goals and areas of the CCSMH, the following positions and recommendations are offered in relation to Seniors’ Mental Health and Home Care in Canada.

We recommend:

- The Federal Government should provide new funding for the development of a public education campaign (in collaboration with multiple stakeholders e.g. provincial governments and territories, advocacy groups) to increase awareness of mental health issues for seniors.
- Mandatory change in eligibility criteria for home care services including approval for services based on mental illness / health needs, regardless of co-existing physical challenges.
- Investment in the identification, development & integration of mental health specific assessment tools to ensure that the mental health needs of seniors are included as primary services.
- Services for seniors’ with mental health needs must include service provisions such as assistance with personal care activities, professional services (i.e. Social work, Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists), homemaking services and ongoing case management.
- Home care be inclusive of support services for caregivers as part of a home care support package. Appropriate funding must be made available so that caregiving support services are not placed on the back burner to physical support services.
- Increased funding assistance targeted at gathering, analyzing and disseminating of data and best practices for the delivery of home care health services for seniors’ mental health.
- Dedicated investment into the development and dissemination of education and training specific to the subject of home care, seniors and mental health. Education and training of all home care service providers must be included as a standard for ensuring appropriate care, and for accountability at the provider, provincial and national levels.
- The development of a National Home Care Program with dedicated funds to assist provinces and territories to develop programs with standards, accountability and integration with the larger health care system. In addition, there is a need to identify and create a priority home care program for Seniors, with a focus on prevention, identification and treatment of both mental and physical health and wellness needs. Accountability must exist at national and provincial levels to ensure adequate, appropriate, cost effective and integrated home care services provided on an ongoing basis.
- Increased resources for specialized geriatric mental health services to support home care services.

Summary

Ensuring that the vision for an effective home care delivery service that meets the needs of seniors with mental health problems becomes a reality, will require dedicated resources for initiatives and changes in the areas of education and training, research, assessment and treatment and public awareness. The CCSMH will continue to partner with provincial networks, appropriate agencies and organizations to support and advocate for change in policy, to make certain that there is accountability and to ensure that seniors’ mental health issues are recognized as key to ensuring that services and resources continue to change and expand with the growing seniors population in Canada.

References: Home Care & People With Psychiatric Disabilities, K. Parent, M. Anderson & B. Neuwelt, October 2000; A Report on Mental Illnesses in Canada, Health Canada, October 2002; A Portrait of Seniors in Canada, Statistics Canada; Provincial and Territorial Home Care Programs: A Synthesis for Canada, Health Canada ; National Profile on of Family Caregivers in Canada-2002 Final Report; Building on Value: The Future of Health Care in Canada; Romanow; Study on the State of the Health Care System in Canada, Kirby; 2003 First Ministers Health Accord, Fact Sheets on Home Care, 2003.; OACCAC Mandate & Service Priorities, 2001.