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Conference Report

Making the Connection: Improving University Student Mental Health Services Through Collaboration, Cooperation and Partnership

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Prepared by
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(AAU)

At a landmark conference in the autumn of 2012, Atlantic Canada's universities took a hard look at the issues surrounding mental health and vowed to improve the delivery of services to students. A year later, universities in the region have started to share and implement best practices; to extend that collaborative effort to include health care providers in the community; and to promote peer-to-peer mental health services.

These trends emerged at the 2nd regional conference on student mental health services (*Making the Connection: Improving university student mental health services through collaboration, cooperation and partnership*) which was held Oct. 30 at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). And if the 2012 conference (*Developing a University Team Approach to Student Mental Health Care*), held Nov.1 at Mount Allison University, was a wake-up call that universities and society-at-large should better understand mental illness and provide appropriate help to affected students, delegates to this year's conference were clearly intent on demonstrating that best-practice examples are already being put in place.

Dr. Ramona Lumpkin, President and Vice-Chancellor of MSVU, was declarative in her opening remarks to the conference. One in five Canadians suffers from mental health disorders, she said, and many feel alone and isolated as a consequence. It is time universities worked together to "eliminate the stigma" surrounding mental health, she said. Wade MacLauchlan, Chair, [Medavie Health Foundation Board](#) and President Emeritus, University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI), underscored the urgency of the issues at hand by telling delegates it is essential to extend mental health services to students at a "stage of their life cycle and health cycle when it is possible to make a difference." The Medavie Health Foundation sponsored the conference in collaboration with the Association of Atlantic Universities (AAU).

David Pilon, Program Leader, Specialty Mental Health Services, Capital District Health Authority (CDHA), also stressed the need for providing mental health services to young people in the "crucible of their teen years." Even though 70 per cent of mental health disorders strike Canadians before their 25th birthday, three out of four affected children and youth go untreated. "Untreated and under-treated mental health problems and illness can contribute increased acuity of illness, high risk behaviours, social isolation, diminished potential and family impacts and burden," according to Dr. Pilon's presentation.

University students are most likely to struggle with mental health issues like depression and anxiety, which are familiar to most Canadians. But treatment is also crucial for helping students suffering from more severe mental health disorders. Rice Fuller, Acting Executive Director of Student Affairs and Services at the University of New Brunswick, underscored the positive impact of providing counselling to even the most troubled students. According to a [2013 American College Health Association survey](#) whose respondents included more than 34,000 Canadian students, 9.5 per cent of students reported they had seriously considered suicide in the

past year. According to U.S. data, the suicide death rate among university students is 6.5-7.5 per 100,000. The encouraging news is that outcomes are far better for students who find help. Dr. Fuller said “students who receive counselling are six times less likely to die by suicide than those who don’t.”

Alex Fountain was a warm young man who ended up on the wrong side of the cold statistics. The bright, engaging 20-year-old A-student took his life in 2009, while studying at the University of King’s College in Halifax. His parents Fred and Elizabeth Fountain, well-known Halifax philanthropists, told Alex’s story in a moving keynote address to the conference at MSVU. “Alex’s death is too painful to remember,” his father said. “It’s too painful to forget his life.” Alex’s depression had “unfolded seemingly out of the blue in the last year of his life,” Fred said. Elizabeth remembers her son as sweet-natured and kind. “He didn’t judge people. . . He had everything. . . It was like the lights just went out.”

Alex’s death taught his Mother “not to judge others. We are surrounded by people screaming at us to tell how much they are hurt. We need to make some noise . . . Silence helps no one.” The Fountains were determined to listen to the anguished cries of others, and it was with what Fred called a sense of “hope and optimism” that the couple donated more than \$1 million to the “Stay Connected Mental Health Project” in Halifax. Under the leadership of Dr. Pilon, the program was designed to provide a seamless transition of care for patients as they move from child to adult psychiatric services – the former provided by the IWK Hospital, the latter the CDHA.

It was later decided to extend the partnership to five universities in the Halifax area – Dalhousie, Saint Mary’s, Mount Saint Vincent and NSCAD universities and the University of King’s College. Key initiatives being taken with the universities include:

- Distribution of the IWK and Capital Health Mental Health and Addictions Programs “landscape map” to university counselling services offices, and other suitable venues. The map will help students discover “appropriate pathways” to care when their needs “exceed what university-based services can provide.”
- Creation of a university-hospital liaison committee that will review changes in service needs and delivery, and enhance collaborative practices of the university health and hospital services.
- Provision to first year students with an electronic copy of *Transitions*, which will also be distributed in hard-copy versions to appropriate venues like health clinics and student union buildings. *Transitions* provides first-year university students with information on a variety of topics, including relationships, mental illness and addictions. It directs

students to self-help information and also tells them where they can find help on campus.

- Identification of early signs of student distress. Under this program, information will be distributed in written and video formats to help faculty, staff and students better identify students experiencing severe and/or other mental health problems. An effort will also be made to better integrate and share resources across universities.
- Possible training and certification of student peer support workers. “Our partner universities are exploring how best to utilize peer support to assist and support students with mental health needs.”

Indeed, the importance of peer counselling, or at least peer involvement in reaching students suffering from mental health issues, was stressed by many conference participants. Dr. Fuller said about two-thirds of students with suicidal thoughts will talk to peers first about their problems. “With traditional clinical interventions, we are going to miss more than half the people in trouble,” he said. That idea was echoed by Marriam Abou-El-Haj, a counsellor at MSVU who learned from experience that students won’t just show up at her office door in seek of counselling help. The university made a break-through in de-stigmatizing counselling services by partnering with the university’s Student Union. “This was a big eye-opener for us. When students are involved there is so much less stigma.” MSVU also employs a canine counsellor, a Shi Tzu Therapy dog named Oscar who puts in a day a week at the university. “Thursdays with Oscar” is by far the busiest day of the day for the MSVU counselling services.

Anne Bartlett, the co-ordinator of the Pathways to Academic Success at the UPEI, also stressed that the traditional clinical model for providing mental health services is too narrow. UPEI’s goal is to create a cross-campus “foundation of care” by reaching out to student leaders and using an e-newsletter to build a culture of connectedness at the institution. At Dalhousie University, Victor Day has launched another innovative initiative for extending medical health services to a wider population. Dr. Day, director of Dal’s Counselling and Psychological Services, helps run online self-help programs. At a time when many students would rather text than talk, his programs are capturing a demographic of clients that would otherwise not seek help. “Many want online help” for depression, pain disorders, anxiety and habits. The Dalhousie program, which uses trained student coaches, helps people “who don’t want to talk about their problems” but are comfortable with online collaboration with peers. Day says there have been more than 70 controlled clinical trials for online help programs and they have been shown to work.

In the end, the spirit of this year’s conference may have best been defined by Jeff Hollett, Associate Vice-President Student Experience at MSVU. “Learning never occurs unless people feel safe,” Mr. Hollett said. And while universities in Atlantic Canada have moved some distance toward accomplishing the goal which Mr. Hollett defines in that sentence, a consensus

emerged at the conference that much remains to be done. Delegate feedback suggested a five-point action plan for moving forward:

1. A repository of information where institutions/practitioners can share information about trends in mental health and innovations in the development and delivery of programs. Memorial University (MUN) has already created a website for this purpose;
2. Increased emphasis on developing peer-to-peer services on campus;
3. Continued practice of sharing best practices among our universities;
4. Once best practices are identified, the universities should enshrine them by offering consistent, top quality, student mental health practices across all campuses in Atlantic Canada.
5. The Stay Connected Mental Health Project developed by CDHA should be seen as a model that could be applied by each university across the region in collaboration with local health authorities.

MSVU's Ramona Lumpkin, who is also Chair of the AAU Council, says the commitment to delivering improved mental health care services to students is a crucial one. "This goes to the heart of what we are as educators. This is part of our effort to give young people an opportunity to succeed at our universities, and in their lives." Wade MacLauchlan also said the Medavie Health Board Foundation's commitment and contribution will be an ongoing one. "Child and Youth Mental Health is one of our core causes. Our collaborative effort to work with universities on this issue offers significant potential to affect positive change for future generations."

Presentations from the AAU and Medavie Health Foundation conference can be found at www.atlanticuniversities.ca.

