

No confidence in VIHA's mental-health efforts

By Dr. André Masters, Special to Times Colonist June 17, 2010

The letter from Alan Campbell, Vancouver Island Health Authority director of mental health, suggests he must be living on a different planet than the majority of front-line psychiatrists and case managers who are trying to deal with cuts to services for their chronically ill mental health patients in Victoria ("Services increased to the mentally ill," June 9).

On my planet, the following facts are the reality:

- A motion passed at the Nov. 10, 2009, meeting of the department of psychiatry, south Island, condemned the unacceptable way in which budget reductions in mental health took place, the lack of clinical consultation, the significant failure of managers and co-ordinators to share information and the resulting low morale, despondency and mistrust that had ensued.

- A draft e-mail in November 2009 from one of Campbell's managers stated, "With the reduction of six case management staff in early December, the case management program will need to discharge a total of over 300 individuals in the next few weeks." Case managers are afraid to speak out about this, or any other matter affecting their patients, for fear of retribution by senior management. This is not a healthy state of affairs.

- On Nov. 30, 2009, and because of continued frustration with management, a group of nine psychiatrists signed a letter of complaint about a situation in the Mental Health Centre that also referred to low morale affecting staff. Nothing was done to address the complaints; the reply from Campbell on Dec. 3 said he was directly involved in the decisions made and was accountable.

- On April 22, 2010, we received notice that Dr. Anthony Barale was closing his outpatient neuropsychiatry practice at Victoria General Hospital. He complained about the lack of concern by VIHA for brain-injured patients, who are amongst the most complex in the system. He said they have organic brain conditions, addictions, concurrent psychiatric disorders and multiple medical conditions, yet mental health is currently putting up as many barriers as possible to this patient group. He is no longer prepared to support a system that is failing patients and their families.

- Dr. Adam Gunn has tendered his resignation from the Schizophrenia Clinic and Affective Disorders Clinic in Victoria effective June 26. He referred to difficulty with the profoundly negative effects that VIHA cuts have had on patient care, causing serious concerns about safety and the expectation that there will be dangerous consequences, with patients' lives at stake.

He said he could no longer be a part of it. He went on to state that the quality of care has already been severely eroded, and accessing treatment services for quite ill patients is now extremely difficult and in some cases impossible. As well, he felt that VIHA has now become an unhealthy workplace, with patients, their families and his colleagues deserving better and believed that bad things will follow from this in the coming months. Other VIHA psychiatrists are considering resigning because of similar concerns.

Meanwhile, VIHA funds programs for patients to do yoga, Qigong and power walking. Not much use to the patients of Barale and Gunn, nor to the 194 patients I saw in 2009 who suffer from schizophrenia, bipolar mood disorder and serious depression. Not much use to the 300 Mental Health Clinic patients who have been disenfranchised with the loss of six of their case managers.

Mental health management continues to bury its head in the sand and ignore a very large group of chronically mentally ill patients. They and their families rarely speak out; they do not cause problems downtown, and are no more likely to commit crime than the general population. Indeed most of my patients have been afraid to go downtown or near Our Place because of the presence of the drug abusers who present a threat and are most likely to commit crimes, from theft to serious assaults.

The problems downtown have been erroneously blamed on the mentally ill. Their incidence in the population has remained static, but there has been a totally unacceptable explosion in the numbers of drug addicts who have been allowed to take over our city.

Repeatedly, I have called for an audit of actions taken by mental health management in the last three years, but this has fallen on deaf ears.

André Masters is a psychiatrist who has worked in mental health for 49 years in the United Kingdom, Saskatchewan and Victoria. He recently retired from a position as a consultant in general psychiatry at the Victoria Mental Health Centre, but continues to do part-time consultations for the Mental Health Service in Victoria.

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