

A terrible failure on mental illness

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There is no worry greater than being the parent of a child with a serious mental illness or addiction. Any illness suffered by a family member is, of course, traumatic.

But for most ailments and injuries, especially critical ones, there is support and help. If your child has cancer, the health care system provides remarkable care; support services help the family; friends and neighbours pitch in. Parents know that even after they are gone, their child will be supported.

None of those things is true for people suffering with mental illness. We would not turn someone away requiring critical cancer care; we routinely tell people dealing with serious -- potentially fatal -- mental illness that there just isn't space to provide care. Patients are stigmatized and families isolated.

The consequences are terrible for individuals, families and society.

The tragic stabbing death of 15-year-old Justin Wendland has refocused attention. The man charged with murder has a long history of mental illness and addiction.

But it should hardly take such a case to remind us of this health care failure. Look at downtown streets and the people camped along Pandora Avenue most nights.

Most are not well. Of some 1,400 homeless people in the city, about 40 per cent have a mental illness; 50 per cent have an addiction. Many are dealing with both.

That means that some 800 sick people are warehoused on the streets with little or no support or treatment. Often, they lurch from crisis to crisis. When things get bad enough, there is a brief, expensive response from the system, in the form of acute care or jail time. Then they are left on their own until the next crisis.

It's not easy to provide treatment. Some patients reject help; others shun medication that could assist in managing their illnesses (sometimes with good reason). Others are just terribly difficult. Involuntary treatment is sometimes necessary.

But we are a long, long way from having to worry about finding ways to persuade the recalcitrant to accept care.

Even when people want care -- when their families are desperate -- there are likely no beds available and little support. The Vancouver Island Health Authority cut mental health services in the capital region, both psychiatric beds and community support. Patients who should be in the hospital, according to their doctors, aren't. Some 350 patients lost the support of mental health caseworkers.

VIHA is simply balancing priorities against inadequate funding. Mental illness is a lesser priority.

But the health system's savings are offset by the extra costs for policing, shelters and crisis response.

It must be noted that mental illness, like many other diseases, can be managed. Millions of people live happy, productive lives. Even those seriously ill are rarely -- almost never -- a danger to anyone but themselves.

But the extreme cases are a reminder of the high price we pay every day for failing to provide adequate mental health care.

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