

Lori Spadorcia, Senior Vice President, Public Affairs, Partnerships and Chief Strategy Officer at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), kicked off the third of our very successful Ontario Council Speakers Series held February 27th, 2021. The topic of this event was ***Mental Health - From Prevention to Wellness***. Because of Lori's experience and position within CAMH, she was able to bring to light the gaps which currently exist for the management of mental health and provided opportunities for advocacy within the mental health framework with some notion of moving into recovery.

Lori emphasised the lasting and discriminatory stigma that mental illness carries. CAMH has developed marketing campaigns to expand awareness and promote mental illness as a health issue instead of a character flaw which delays reporting and treatment of mental health in people suffering its affects, but admitted forward momentum is tough. It is a tremendous challenge to overcome the barriers to objective views of mental health issues. CAMH has developed the tagline – “why do some illnesses get treatment and others get judgement?” Rather than thinking about mental illness as a moral failure or a judicial issue, CAMH encourages its consideration as a health problem.

Because of its history, the challenges for recognition of mental illnesses as a health problem fall into three pillars in the approach to mental health according to Lori – a science gap, a justice gap and an advocacy gap. Investment in understanding the brain has lagged behind other illnesses. Substance abuse is still not discussed in the context of health care and is criminalised. Funding, for example in the case of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is an effective, evidence-based treatment but is not covered by our health system. Interestingly, COVID is putting mental health issues under a microscope and may offer a means for very active and loud advocacy in addressing mental health.

The current climate of increased mental health issues because of COVID's need for isolation and job/income losses have not only exacerbated mental illness for those already afflicted but have strained the already burdened system as more and more Ontarians, young and old, try to cope with increased fear and anxiety.

Lori showed a chart with information released by the Canadian Medical Association about what contributes to the health of Canadians, citing life issues as affecting 50% of those who are ill. Social determinants are a major contributor to mental health and statistics emphasise that housing and food security are inextricably and critically tied to mental and physical health. CAMH is trying to change the narrative of health to include social determinants as areas which require investment as well.

Mental health problems associated with COVID are being variously described as the shadow pandemic and fourth wave (amongst others). Like other issues (long term care, for example), mental health as an entity has been a crisis for a long time and COVID has only served to highlight the issue.

Women have been particularly affected by COVID, often trying to manage child care, new teaching responsibilities and jobs as essential front line workers or losing their jobs altogether. Recognising this, CAMH has been following women and children and the impact of COVID through surveys to identify the huge impact on mental health that is expected to continue surface and to ready its structures to help.

Building back better (from COVID), the catchphrase of governments, for CAMH means not going back to normal but addressing issues like housing, proper treatment for substance abuse, investment in broadband for education, and investing in children to bring equity to our population. Nevertheless, it is a long journey so Lori iterates that we must keep our eye on science, justice and advocacy. For Lori, science and its collaboration intertwined with community and interconnectedness are front and centre.

The new recognition that mental health matters is to be capitalised on. Every voice must join the fight for mental health. She implored that CFUW advocate for mental health awareness and especially treatment as the province moves forward, with an inclusive recovery for all.

NOTE: You may be interested in quick history of where Lori works (CAMH) which has been built on the site of the original Ontario Asylum built in 1815 at Queen and Ossington (outside of the Toronto city limits). Of special note is the wall that surrounded the Asylum, built by patients. A portion of this heritage wall remains and is preserved in their memory.