



Why a National Mental Health Strategy is Critical to Preventing Future Tragedies

(Winnipeg, Manitoba – March 5, 2009) – The Schizophrenia Society of Canada (SCC) extends its sympathy to both the McLean family and the Li family as they struggle to come to terms with the tragic incident around the death of Timothy McLean.

The Schizophrenia Society of Canada remains concerned about the negative or limited information that exists regarding individuals with schizophrenia and psychosis. This has been evident in the recent case of Vincent Li.

Since 1 in 5 Canadians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime, and 1 in 100 people will be diagnosed with schizophrenia, it raises the issue for reflection on the nature of mental illnesses including what they are and what they are not in regards to symptoms, treatment and risks of violence.

This is especially true as such an unfortunate event as the McLean/Li tragedy surfaces the social prejudice and stigma that is still prevalent in our society. This is one reason why many with mental health problems and mental illness do not seek out help and treatment. Immigrants from other cultures often struggle with pronounced feelings of stigma regarding mental illness. Thus the SSC supports the Mental Health Commission of Canada's proposed creation of a ten-year Anti-Stigma and Anti-Discrimination Campaign.

According to Chris Summerville, the Chief Executive Officer of the Schizophrenia Society of Canada, the likelihood of violence by people with mental illness is exceptionally low. In fact, people living with mental illness are more often the victims of violence. "Fortunately, studies show that when people who were or would have been dangerous receive psychiatric treatment they are no more dangerous than people without a diagnosis. But they have to receive the treatment," says Dr. John Gray, a board member of the British Columbia Schizophrenia Society.

Schizophrenia and psychosis are treatable! But early identification and intervention in treating mental illness are crucial as treatment options do work. Vince Li was beginning treatment at a mental health facility in Ontario as an involuntary patient. But he left the hospital without anyone apparently intervening. Therefore it raises the question about whether the mental health care system responded appropriately in this case. When he returned to Winnipeg, his family and friends knew something was wrong. Unfortunately, little effort was made to help him seek treatment due to lack of awareness of the signs and symptoms of psychosis. If the warning signs were there and he did not receive help,

then the question is how to educate family and friends, as well as the public about accessing mental health services.

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This tragic event reinforces the urgent need for a national mental health strategy. Despite the significant health, economic and social costs of mental illness, Canada is the only G8 nation without a national strategy on mental illness. Summerville who is also a board member of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, says, "In many areas in Canada, there is a lack of psychiatric beds as well as lengthy wait times to access appropriate mental health care." He adds, "If there were not a comprehensive hospital or community services for people with cancer, heart problems or other medical conditions, we as a society would be outraged. Stigma and the lack of social and political will have resulted in Canada's failed mental health system."

The Schizophrenia Society of Canada is urging the federal government to adopt a national mental health strategy that is recovery-oriented and encompasses mental health literacy, mental health promotion, early intervention, adequate treatment as well as community supports and services.

While we understand and empathize with Timothy's mother and the McLean family and support their concern for public safety, we do not believe that the proposed "Tim's Law", which would have individuals deemed Not Criminally Responsible (NCR) incarcerated for life, is the solution. Both Tim McLean and Mr. Li are victims of a complete psychotic episode, in which Mr. Li had no insight and awareness of his actions.

About the Schizophrenia Society of Canada

The Schizophrenia Society of Canada, founded in 1979, is dedicated to improving the quality of life for those affected by schizophrenia and psychosis through education, support programs, public policy and research. The Society works with 10 provincial societies in a federation model to raise awareness and educate the public in order to reduce stigma and discrimination; support families and individuals; advocate for legislative change; and support research through the SSC Foundation and other independent efforts.

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Fast Facts on Mental Illness

- The economic costs of mental illness exceed \$35 billion a year in terms of lost industrial production alone.
- Thirty-seven per cent of Canadians experience a mental illness in the course of their lifetime.
- The most vulnerable are those in their teens and early to mid-20s.
- Depression today is the fastest growing source of disability in the Canadian labour force, representing 75 per cent of long-term disability and about 40 per cent of short-term disability.

Warning Signs and Symptoms

Confused thinking
Prolonged depression (sadness or irritability)
Feelings of extreme highs and lows
Excessive fears, worries and anxieties
Social withdrawal
Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits
Strong feelings of anger
Delusions or hallucinations
Growing inability to cope with daily problems and activities
Suicidal thoughts
Substance abuse

(Source: Schizophrenia Society of Canada)