

BULLETIN

Bringing hope to shadows

February 1, 2010

The Report: February 2010 vol.31 num.1

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ASK YOUTH CARE COUNSELLOR CURTIS HINES what the best part of his job is and he can answer in one word: -Hope," he says.

Hines counsels mentally ill youth who are in adolescent psychiatric wards, and provides support for their families. Witnessing young people caught in the suffering of mental illness is not always easy, but what counts, says Hines, is that he can help.

-Lots of times these kids feel hopeless, for instance if theyve been depressed for a long time, but as they start to feel better they gain some hope," he says.

Families, too, can lose hope, especially when they learn their childs illness is likely to be a life-long condition. Hines job is to educate them, letting them know that there are effective ways to manage the illness so that their son or daughter can lead a rewarding, functional life. This information can be deeply meaningful to parents.

-I think the most powerful thing I can do is to give people hope," he says.

At Abbotsford Regional Hospital, where Hines worked until recently, the goal was to keep adolescents no longer than two weeks in the adolescent unit. -We want to get them back into the community; we really dont want to be institutionalizing our youth," Hines explains. He says he often sees big improvements in his clients over the course of their stay.

-Its so gratifying to see someone make significant changes," he says.

So its all the more frustrating for Hines to have experienced funding cuts to adolescent psychiatry that recently cost him his job.

Hines had a full time position at Abbotsford Regional Hospitals adolescent psychiatry unit until the program was closed down last November. He currently has a casual position at Surrey Memorial Hospital.

Hines is of course concerned about the change in his employment situation, but he is even more troubled about the program closure. Adolescents in need of in-patient psychiatric care are very much under-served in BC, he says.

-There are a lot of resources poured into adult services, but the lack of psychiatric services for adolescents is huge. There are only three adolescent psychiatric units in the province, while almost every hospital has adult psychiatric beds," he says.

The closure of the adolescent unit at Abbotsford means youth needing care will either be left in the community

or put into the adult unit, which is not the most effective or safe place for them, Hines explains.

-You need to treat them differently according to their age and stage of development. That's why we have separate units. Also, young people are more vulnerable to many things, for instance, to other patients. And there's a lot more teaching needed with adolescents," he explains. Adolescent psychiatric units include a school component and also have a higher staff-to-patient ratio than the adult units.

-I think in BC we've lost our focus when it comes to how we allocate resources and how we spend money," says Hines. -Things seem really skewed right now. For instance, the Olympics are an example of hundreds of millions being spent on something that will last two weeks. They're spending \$980 million on Olympic security ... this would run the Abbotsford adolescent unit for 1000 years," he says.

Hines' passion for helping young people, and his ardent support of the programs that do so, is based on personal experience: he is a former crack cocaine addict who successfully went through treatment.

-Having experienced both addiction and what it is to go through a program and be in recovery, it seemed like a natural fit to move into the mental health field," he says.

While undergoing his drug addiction treatment, Hines realized he wanted to go to college.

-So when I left treatment I said no matter what I am going to go to school. Six months later I enrolled at Douglas College," he says. Hines graduated with a diploma as a Community Social Service Worker and went on to work in drug addiction treatment. One job involved working with adolescents withdrawing from drugs and alcohol, and Hines found that he enjoyed working with youth. When he saw the posting for a position in adolescent psychiatry at Abbotsford, he decided to apply.

The shift from the addictions field to mental health came easily, he says.

-Sixty per cent of people with addictions have an underlying mental health issue," he explains.

One reason he finds his work so compelling, he says, is that he is helping one of the most vulnerable segments of society. Along with the pain and functional challenges of their illness, mentally ill people face daunting social stigmas.

-We hear a lot about people who are mentally ill doing horrible things," says Hines. -But we know from research that people with mental illness are far more likely to be victimized than to hurt someone."

Currently, Hines is considering returning to school to get a degree, in order to increase his employment opportunities. Although he is angry and disappointed about the closure of the Abbotsford unit, he still loves his work and has not lost sight of its value.

-I love working with the kids and families, and I see how I can make a difference.

-For instance, there was a young lady I saw in the Abbotsford Hospital; I think she was about 16 or 17. The diagnosis was bi-polar and when she came in she was very psychotic. She thought there were people watching her, she thought she was Britney Spears, she thought her high-school principal was getting her into porno•She was there about six weeks and by the end of the stay she had cleared completely. It was very gratifying to see that kind of recovery," says Hines. 

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