More awareness boosts demand for psychologists

BY DEREK AJAX, POSTMEDIA NEWS | NOVEMBER 2, 2013

While much of the demand in the job market centres on technology and trade, there is also a growing need for those whose specialty is the human mind.

Psychologists are among the most in-demand professionals in Canada. A report issued in late 2012, by the Canadian Psychological Association, showed that more than 4,000 psychologists were employed in Canada in 2011, up from 3,000 in 2005.

One possible reason for the growing demand is the increasing awareness of the importance of mental health and the stigma attached to those who seek help. People are more open to using psychological services.

In recent years, the majority of new psychologists have been entering the private practice sector rather than pursuing positions in public institutions such as hospitals, schools, and prisons.

Laura Nichols, an Ottawa psychologist who started her independent practice in June, has been busy getting new clients.

"I'm pleasantly surprised," she says. "Private practice is incredible. There's a lot of interest, and that kind of is increasing every day. You're an entrepreneur. You don't really get to work on a salary. Most of us don't know anything about business and marketing, so all of that is a big learning curve."

Nichols expects her client volume and income to grow as she becomes more established. She is attracting clients from a variety of channels, including referrals from psychologists who share advertising, being listed in an online directory of local psychologists and social networking.

Nichols, 48, specializes in women's mental health, anxiety, mood disorders and addiction. Her educational and career path took a few turns along the way. She began her undergraduate studies in music before switching to psychology, and worked for several years as an addictions counselor before pursuing her PhD in psychology.

Those associated with the profession say it requires about 10 to 12 years of education and training to become a licensed psychologist. This includes undergraduate and graduate studies, as well as approximately one year of practice under the supervision of other psychologists and completing exams required by the provincial governing bodies of the profession.

Caroline Pukall, director of clinical training at the psychology department at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., says treating mood disorders such as depression and anxiety, children's disorders and sexual issues are among the areas where there is growth in demand.

"I think the threshold for referring someone to a psychologist has become lower," she says. "We see this so often: you need some help before it gets really bad. Some of the outcomes in terms of being depressed or highly anxious can be quite devastating in terms of function and in terms of fatigue. Some people do commit suicide."

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