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Canada's Psychologists Call for Better Access to Mental Health Services for Post-Secondary Students

Ottawa, ON (September 29, 2016) – The Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) echoes the Ontario University and College Health Association (OUCHA) in calling on post-secondary institutions to provide better access to psychological services for young adults with mental health problems.

Last week, OUCHA released data from the 2016 Ontario Reference Group of the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) indicating that rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide have increased since Ontario university and college students were last surveyed in 2013. Almost two-thirds of students reported feeling overwhelmed with anxiety in the previous year and just under half reported feeling so depressed they found it difficult to function.

While many Canadian post-secondary institutions and student groups are working to combat the stigma associated with mental illness, which affects one in five Canadians in a given year, greater investment is needed for effective mental health services. “Stigma certainly plays an important role in whether people will ask for help; however, the lack of access to effective services is becoming the greatest barrier to receiving mental health care,” says Dr. David Dozois, President, CPA.

The services of psychologists, Canada's largest group of specialized and regulated mental health providers, are not covered by provincial and territorial health insurance plans. Canadians either pay out of pocket for psychological services or rely on the private health insurance plans provided by their schools and employers. The coverage provided through private health insurance is almost always too low for a clinically meaningful amount of psychological service. This is especially true for students attending Ontario universities.

“Of the eight Ontario universities whose student health and dental plans we were able to review, only one provided a reasonable amount of coverage for mental health services,” notes Dr. Karen Cohen, CEO, CPA. “Research shows 10 to 20 sessions are typically required for a successful course of psychological treatment. Twenty sessions come at an approximate average cost of \$3,500; however, seven of the eight plans we reviewed only cover between \$300 and \$800 annually. Some also have a cap per visit of \$20 to \$35, and some have co-pays, typically of 25 per cent. This is not good enough.”

People undergo stressful life transitions in late adolescence and early adulthood; these are also times when certain serious mental health disorders, like depression and schizophrenia, are known to first emerge. University student and counselling services often do not have the resources or depth of expertise necessary to meet the mental health needs of students, forcing them to turn to the public system where wait lists are long and many services are not offered, or to rely on the insufficient extended health care coverage provided by their schools.

“Psychological treatments are clinically- and cost-effective, first-line treatments for mental disorders, particularly for the disorders like depression and anxiety that are most commonly faced by Canadians,” adds Dr. Dozois. “Our post-secondary institutions must do better by their students by making treatment available to those who need it and whose success in student life, and Canadian life, will depend on it.”

-30-

About the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA)

The Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) is the national association for the science, practice and education of psychology in Canada. With over 7,000 members and affiliates, CPA is Canada's largest association for psychology. To learn more, visit www.cpa.ca.

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