

We need psychologists!

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Paediatricians are more likely than ever to encounter patients with mental health problems on a daily basis. There is a need for investment in proven treatments, such as psychology-based interventions, for children identified with mental health disorders. There are four main arguments supporting the engagement of psychologists for children with mental health problems: there is clear evidence that psychological interventions can effectively treat a wide range of mental health disorders; many parents and children are more open to exploring psychological therapies rather than medication for mental health problems; psychologists are trained and licensed to perform psychoeducational assessments, which can provide invaluable information about a child's learning profile, attention problems and overall intelligence; and behaviour problems in children can be prevented or improved through parent-based interventions. The authors' strongly advocate for the public funding of psychology services – both in collaborative primary care models and in the school setting.

Key Words: Collaborative care; Mental health; Psychologist services

It's a hard knock life...
–from the musical *Annie*

...for children with mental health problems in Canada whose parents cannot afford mental health services. Untreated, these children are progressively at risk for a range of negative outcomes including adult mental health disorders, poor academic achievement and low socioeconomic status (1).

As an example, in Ontario, the provision of mental health and addiction services for children and youth is the responsibility of three government ministries: the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (community-based mental health centres); the Ministry of Education (school-based mental health services); and the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (hospital-based care). These services are often fragmented – lacking systemic coordination and coherence – and have been called the “orphan child of health care” (2). It has been estimated that fewer than one in six children with mental health problems receive specialized mental health services in Ontario (2). A recent report from the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences highlighted not only the lack of access to child mental health services but also the inequity in accessing these services; youth living in the highest-income neighbourhoods saw psychiatrists more often than children in the lowest-income neighbourhoods (2). Unfortunately, data regarding access to psychologists

Il nous faut des psychologues!

Les pédiatres sont plus susceptibles que jamais de rencontrer quotidiennement des patients qui ont des troubles de santé mentale. L'investissement dans des traitements démontrés s'impose, tels que les interventions de nature psychologique, pour les enfants chez qui on décèle ce type de troubles. Quatre grands arguments appuient l'embauche de psychologues pour les enfants ayant des troubles de santé mentale : les données probantes démontrent clairement que les interventions psychologiques peuvent traiter des troubles de santé mentale très variés, de nombreux parents et enfants sont plus ouverts à explorer des thérapies psychologiques qu'à opter pour la médication dans ce contexte, les psychologues sont formés et détiennent un permis pour effectuer des évaluations psychoéducatives, ce qui peut fournir de l'information précieuse sur le profil d'apprentissage de l'enfant, ses troubles d'attention et son intelligence globale, et il est possible de prévenir ou d'atténuer des troubles de comportement chez les enfants grâce à des interventions des parents. Les auteurs préconisent fortement le financement public de services de psychologie, tant dans le cadre de modèles de soins coopératifs de première ligne qu'en milieu scolaire.

was not included in this report because psychologists are not funded in the current medical system. Psychology services, including evidence-based treatments such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), are mainly available to those with private health insurance, or to those who can afford to pay out of pocket (3).

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS IN THE PAEDIATRIC OFFICE

Paediatricians are more likely than ever to encounter patients with mental health problems on a daily basis; primarily because mental health problems have replaced physical problems in the top five disabilities affecting children (1). In Canada, Waddell et al (4), estimated that approximately one in seven children experience mental health issues that impair function and cause significant symptoms. As a result, there has been increasing attention to address mental health problems in children. The Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Committee of the Canadian Paediatric Society has provided a list of screening tools and rating scales for several different mental health symptoms online (5). The American Academy of Pediatrics published a policy statement about mental health competencies for paediatric primary care that was accompanied by a “mental health toolkit”, which included resources and tools required for addressing mental

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health problems in community care (6). Both paediatric organizations have mainly focused on the identification of mental health problems. While important, identification alone will not change the outcomes for children with mental health problems. We need to invest in proven treatments and strategies. Partnering with psychologists may address the current gap in care for these children and their families.

PSYCHOLOGISTS' ROLE IN MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS IN CHILDREN

There are four main arguments supporting the engagement of psychologists for children with mental health problems. First, there is clear evidence that psychological interventions (such as CBT) can effectively treat a wide range of mental health disorders in children and youth, including depression, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders and substance abuse (7,8). Second, many parents and children are more open to exploring psychological therapies rather than medication for mental health problems (7). Third, psychologists, unlike physicians, are trained to perform psychoeducational assessments, which can provide invaluable information about a child's learning profile, attention problems and overall intelligence. This information can be used to better understand the impact of mental health challenges on learning and processing, and help inform recommendations about how parents and educators can support children. Furthermore, given that psychological therapy is a form of learning, this information can be used to tailor how we help children learn strategies for managing symptoms and building skills.

Our final argument is that the prevention of mental health disorders in children and youth should be regarded as a priority. Psychology services have been demonstrated to help prevent behavioural problems through parent-based interventions. One systematic review found convincing evidence for the efficacy of parental programs with a cognitive behavioural component in decreasing oppositional disorders in young children with disruptive behaviours, and improving parenting skills and the mental health of parents (9). Another systematic review identified emerging evidence for the prevention of behavioural problems using parenting programs with a cognitive behavioural component in preschool children without current behaviour problems (10). In most provinces, some parenting programs are offered free of charge from public health agencies; however, wait times are long and specific (evidence-based) programs are not always available.

In adults, and children and adolescents, treatment of mental health disorders with CBT has been proven to be cost effective (3,11,12). In the United Kingdom and Australia, good clinical outcomes combined with unequivocal economic benefits of psychology services has contributed to a shift in health care funding policy, resulting in increased access to publicly funded psychology services including CBT (3,11).

CURRENT ACCESS AND OTHER MODELS OF CARE

In the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences' report about mental health care services (2), 25% of children and youth waited >3 months to see a physician (either a paediatrician or psychiatrist) for a mental health problem (2). One way to reduce this wait time could be to refer directly to a psychologist. For example, in the Netherlands, psychologists have an essential role in primary care. Primary care psychologists are publicly funded and work in close collaboration with general practitioners. Family physicians and paediatricians can easily refer to psychologists for a range of mental health problems with minimal wait times (8). In Canada,

psychologists could collaborate more with primary care physicians; however, the ratio of psychologists to the general population is greater in the Netherlands (1:1390) compared with some provinces in Canada (Alberta 1:1500, Ontario 1:3200) (8).

The combination of high health care costs associated with mental health problems in childhood and the high nonhealth care costs, such as social support, education, justice and family costs as well as poor economic outcomes in adulthood, make a strong case for the need for a substantial increase in investments in the treatment of childhood mental health disorders (12). In our opinion, improved access to psychology services can play an important role in the remodelling of mental health services for children in Canada. In a report from the Canadian Psychological Association, "An imperative for change – access to psychological services for Canada", the importance of collaborative primary care models and collaborative specialist care models were emphasized to improve access to psychologists (8). Stepped care models for children with mental health problems were also recommended – this approach will enable many children to be treated by other allied health professionals (eg, nurses and social workers) under the supervision of a psychologist (8).

Another way to improve access to psychology services for children and youth would be an increased delivery of psychology services through the education system. In an inner city Toronto school-based health centre, approximately one in five children were diagnosed with a mental health disorder (13). School-based health centres in the United States are known to have a major focus on mental health services, and these health centers often have mental health care providers on site. Psychology services within the Canadian education system are limited, resulting in long wait times for an assessment (as long as two years) and an emphasis on assessment over intervention. One way to increase access to psychology services could be to train educators or support service staff in the school to provide CBT and/or to deliver CBT in groups in collaboration with a school psychologist. Traditional boundaries between medical and education sectors need to be broken down through systems integration and interprofessionalism. Psychology, which bridges the education and mental health system, is in an ideal position to help bridge these sectors and to improve care for children and families. Furthermore, partnerships between interprofessional community health centres, the school system and paediatricians may provide an innovative infrastructure for making psychology services available to children and adolescents (14).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Paediatricians have been drawing attention to the need for improved mental health services for children for years. We strongly advocate for the funding of psychology services – both in collaborative primary care models and in the school setting. Each province and territory should offer public access to psychology services, either through schools or mental health clinics, with wait times <1 week for urgent care, and no longer than three to six months for nonurgent care. As the Canadian Psychological Association report stated, "the inclusion of psychologists' services in the funding envelope should be seen as a logical progression of the overall transition to more effective and efficient primary care in Canada" (8). Partnering with psychologists is one of many strategies to improve the treatment of mental health problems in children. We need to ensure that mental health services will be provided in the most comprehensive, interdisciplinary, evidence-based and cost-effective way. Paediatricians are obligated to act now to improve child mental health outcomes.

Tomorrow is only a day away.

– from the musical *Annie*

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