

Backgrounder

Canadian Soldier & Veterans' Access to Family Therapists

Issue

1. Comprehensive Mental Health Services are offered to injured Canadian soldiers and veterans through “one-stop” shopping at the Canadian Injured Members Access Centres. They are directed to a variety of services from there including Base Mental Health Clinics, Occupational Stress Injury Clinics, the Centre, Veteran Canada Regional Centres, the Veterans Hospital in St. Anne de Bellevue and independent health providers.
2. Members and Veterans deserve to have access to registered Family Therapists so that the whole family can be treated for mental health issues of members that affect them all.

Discussion

Attempts by the federal government to establish Canadian Injured Members Access Centres across the country to treat the increasing number of members of the Canadian Forces suffering with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Occupational Stress Injuries (OSI) have met with a frustrating difficulty in hiring qualified professional staff (*"The National" CBC television, November 12, 2007; CBC Radio News, February 20, 2009*) A recent report from Val D'or (*February 20, 2009*) indicated that a planned startup in March 2009 would have to be delayed until March 2010 due to the difficulty in hiring professional staff. At the same time, the number of returnee soldiers from deployments overseas (most recently Afghanistan) continues to mount. The Hon. LGen (retired) Romeo D'Allaire, Senator, stated that he believes PTSD is an injury and treatment should include the entire family. During a presentation he made to the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defense on May 29, 2008, he pleaded that family members be included in treatment plans.

These soldiers and their families deserve the best therapy available from a full range of trained professionals. Family Therapists are core mental health professionals along with psychiatry, psychology, social work, and psychiatric nursing. Family Therapists are skilled mental health professionals who are uniquely trained to independently provide a full range of mental health services. Family Therapists (Registered as Marriage and Family Therapists (MFT) in Canada) are the only mental health practitioners whose training focuses on family based interventions to individuals, couples and families. At a minimum they are master's level mental health professionals with at least two years post-graduate supervised clinical experience. Registered Family Therapists are trained to diagnose and treat mental and emotional disorders in individuals, couples and families, whether they are cognitive, affective or behavioural in origin, with the application of psychotherapeutic and family systems theories and interventions.

The impact of mental illness on our returning soldiers and veterans is striking. A study in the United States indicated that there are almost 500,000 veterans with a service connected

disability due to mental illness (*Independent Budget*, 2001 Report). A recent study also estimated that the expected risk for PTSD among soldiers returning from the Iraq war is 18%, and from Afghanistan 11%. (Hoge, C.W., Castro, C.A., Messer, S.C., McGurk, D., Cotting, D.I., and Koffman, R.L. *Combat Duty in Iraq and Afghanistan; mental health problems, and barriers to care*. New England Journal of Medicine, 351, 13-22, 2004) Canadian risks are known to be similar.

With the continuing rise of psychological needs among our soldiers and veterans, it is critical that they have access to a full range of mental health care providers including Family Therapists. Research demonstrates that the applications of treatment modalities employed by family therapists are highly effective in the treatment of disorders commonly presented by our soldiers and veterans: especially PTSD and clinical depression. A meta-analysis of applicable research found that the use of family psychotherapy has been shown to significantly improve the lives of individuals suffering from depression by addressing the cognitive, behavioural and interpersonal aspects of this debilitating disorder within a systemic context. (Beach, S., M.D. *Marital and Family Therapy for Depression: Empirically Supported Treatments and Implications for Clinical Decision Making*, 2002) Use of these same therapy techniques in the treatment of individuals suffering from PTSD have been equally effective. (Sladana, D. *Family Interventions in the Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders*, Journal of Projective Psychology and Mental Health 9:57-61, 2002) Overall these studies show a significant decrease in relapse and re-hospitalization rates (20 to 50%) among patients participating in such therapy. (McFarlane, W.M.D. et al, *Family Psychoeducation and Schizophrenia: A Review of the Literature*, 16, 2002)

The availability and accessibility of a qualified pool of trained professionals is crucial for mental health care delivery to our injured soldiers and veterans. Recognizing Family Therapists as a position category in both DND and Veterans Canada (VAC) will go a long way to addressing the pressing shortage of staff by increasing access to mental health professionals by adding 1,000 plus well-trained clinicians.

In the United States the largest healthcare program serving uniformed service personnel and their families (CAHMPUS/TRICARE) has recognized the importance and value of Family Therapists for 30 years as independent, extra-medical providers who are qualified to diagnose and treat mental disorders. Now the Veteran's Administration in the United States has also recognized Family therapists and provided positions for them wherever Veterans are treated.

Recommendation

Members of the Canadian Armed Forces, Canadian Veterans and their families should have access to a full range of mental health professionals, including Family Therapists, to treat mental health disabilities caused by active service to our country. The government should adopt appropriate language by Order in Council to open positions to include Family Therapists within Mental Health Services (DND), the Injured Soldiers Treatment Access Centres, Short and Long Term Disability provided by the Service Income Security Insurance Plan (SISIP), as well as being included as service providers with the extended health plans provided by Blue Cross, Sun Life and Manulife.