Doctor honoured for overcoming addiction

By Vince Versace

NORTHUMBERLAND
- Warkworth's Dr. Michael Kaufmann has been recognized for his courage in overcoming a struggle with addiction and his current work in helping others fight the same battle.

"Addiction and mental illnesses are all equal opportunity illnesses," says Dr. Kaufmann, 54. "There is little stigma with physical illness, but with mental illness or addiction, there is a sense you are less than other people."

Dr. Kaufmann was recently awarded the 2007 Courage to Come Back Award by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health Foundation (CAMH). Dr. Kaufmann says he became aware at a young age that certain prescription drugs effected him in certain ways.

"As a child I realized some drugs, anything with codeine for example, effected my mood, giving me a sense of euphoria," explains Dr. Kaufmann. "Later, when I started my medical training and I was exposed to more of those types of drugs, I used

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Warkworth's Dr. Michael Kaufmann was recognized for his courage in overcoming addiction, by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health Foundation, on Thursday, May 3.

more."

As his career moved forward, after graduating from the University of Toronto in 1979 and moving to Warkworth, both Dr. Kaufmann's stresses and access to pre-

scription drugs increased. Dr. Kaufmann says he no longer took drugs to just help him with fatigue and stress.

"It became that I was not using them to feel good but

to avoid feeling bad," says Dr. Kaufmann. "Any narcotic drugs would do. From painkillers to cough suppressants. I was non-discriminating."

Campbellford-area colleagues tried three times to intervene and help Dr. Kaufmann, he says. It was difficult for Dr. Kaufmann to acknowledge he had an addiction because he was trained to be self-sufficient and believed he had control and could help himself.

"There is a sense of pride and that you should know better," says Dr. Kaufmann. "There also is an awful lot of fear."

The breaking point, which finally pushed Dr. Kaufmann to seek help, came in 1986. He had asked a fellow doctor for help with scheduling patients because his addiction had severely effected his ability to practice. It also was not the first time Dr. Kaufmann leaned on his colleagues for such help. The doctor told Dr. Kaufmann he would not help him. The same doctor told Dr. Kaufmann if he did not seek help that day, he would report him to the Ontario Medical Association.

"It did not occur to me then, when I was ill, that I could have lost more than just my ability to practice medicine. I could have lost my family and my own life," he says. "I felt isolated in my illness."

Dr. Kaufmann was admitted to the Donwood Institute, now CAMH's Brentcliffe site, in 1986 and entered a four-week treatment program. After the program he remained with an addiction doctor who helped in his recovery and follow-up program.

Dr. Kaufmann accepted that his addiction was a part of him and went on to study addiction medicine. He is now certified as a specialist in the field by both the American and Canadian Societies of Addiction Medicine.

In 1995, Dr. Kaufmann became the founding director of the new Physician Health

Program for the Ontario Medical Association in Toronto.

Dr. Kaufmann admits he was initially apprehensive in sharing his addiction battle publicly.

"Even though we are talking about events of 20 years ago I was worried about upsetting my patients of that time," says Dr. Kaufmann. "However, all I have received is support from them and my community."

On Thursday, May 3, Dr. Kaufmann received his courage award at a gala dinner in Toronto. The entire evening was moving and emotional, says Dr. Kaufmann.

"People today get recognized for sinking a certain number of baskets or things like that," says Dr. Kaufmann. "Everybody (who struggles against an addiction or illness) should have the opportunity for the sort of recognition I received."