

Mentally ill children wait for help

BY CHRIS TRABER
Staff Writer

They are innocent, yet condemned; numbed by depression or locked in endless emotional upheaval.

One in five is a victim. One in 10 ponders suicide as their escape.

They forfeit childhood and jeopardize adulthood. As the sickness grows, help diminishes. They stand before us, invisible.

There are 43,000 of them in York Region.

They are children with mental illness.

Of the region's legion of children 18 and younger with mental health issues, help exists for only 5,000 and average wait times to access treatment are seven times longer than waiting for an MRI or CT Scan, reports York Region Parents for Children's Mental Health, the local chapter of a non-profit, parent-run organization.

York, one of Canada's fastest growing and most affluent regions, has the second lowest funding in Ontario for children's mental health services, said Susan Hess, the organization's provincial president.

"No one thinks children can have mental illness," Ms Hess said, noting the province has made no new investment in children's mental health in the past 12 years.

"A large number of the agencies are running poor. Some have had to cut programs and let staff go. Mental illness is the orphaned area of understanding and children's mental health is the orphan's orphan."

The problems with support infrastructure are as complex and ranging as the illness, Ms Hess said. And many of these children purposely go undiagnosed because of the massive societal stigma attached to mental illness.

"Along with the stigma, parents shoulder the blame and shame," she said. "It's the only illness where parents are automatically blamed."

Not unlike Ms Hess, whose now adult daughter was suicidal at age five, Newmarket's Anny Chow is acutely aware of the wait and worry associated with a child's mental health problems.

Her son, Nicholas, was diagnosed at age five with Tourette's syndrome, a disorder affecting communication skills, thought processes and the ability to control emotions.

At eight, doctors diagnosed Aspergers, a form of autism.

While waiting more than seven years for treatment, Ms Chow has witnessed her

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Anny Chow
mother

son struggle at school and in the community. She endured untold heartache and fear.

Nicholas was returned home by police after being caught venting his anger in the community. He threatened his mother with a butcher knife, saying he'd be happier if she were dead. He ran away, leaving a note, "Goodbye and sorry."

Police had to search for him with a helicopter. He was eventually admitted to a Scarborough hospital.

"The attending physician regrettably discharged him after merely one day of observation because his behaviour was deemed to be detrimental to other patients around him," Ms Chow said.

"How can we, as parents, not be broken hearted? How can Nicholas not be angry?"

Eighteen months ago Nicholas was enrolled in day treatment at the York Centre for Children, Youth and Families, one of three York agencies, along with Blue Hills Child and Family Centre and K'nark Child and Family Services, helping children with mental issues.

With treatment and the assistance of a full-time child youth worker, Nicholas is attending high school.

"He's doing fine," Ms Chow said.

"There's no cure. Hopefully, with medication control and maturity, he can step out of it."

Plights of families such as the Chows are heard on a daily basis by York Centre executive director Paul Meadows.

With 32 employees working with 500 children in a small century-old Richmond Hill school, Mr. Meadows is hobbled by a woefully inadequate annual budget of \$1.9 million from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, the United Way, private donations and fundraising efforts.

"In the last 12 years, our base budget has dropped 12 per cent," he said.

"We're a fast growing community. One in five children has a diagnosable mental illness. We're called the mules of the system because kids are dropped on our back but it's grinding to a halt."

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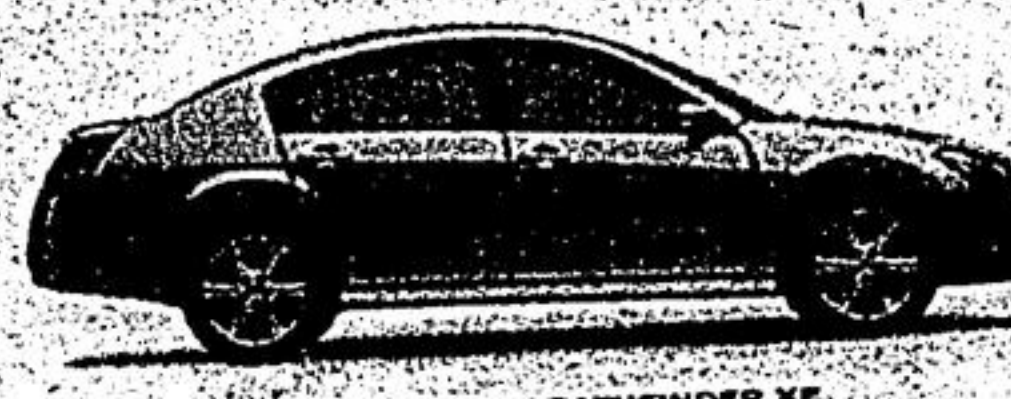
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