Canada stands tall in global fight against depression

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When it comes to addressing the global problem of depression, Canada is standing tall.

Joined by more than 200 international policy makers, senior business leaders, academics and patient advocates, a contingent of Canadians recently took part in The Economist’s world summit, The Global Crisis of Depression: The Low of the 21st Century?, in London. They met to share best practices and examine what measures governments and businesses can take to address the impact of depression.

Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, affecting more than 350 million people. In Canada, one in five will at some point in their lives have a mental illness issue, and with it will come a burden imposed not only on them, but also on staff and productivity in the workplace.

In his passionate keynote address to delegates, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan urged leaders to build the broadest possible partnerships to overcome the many challenges of the impact of mental illness, specifically depression. He described the failure to tackle the global crisis of depression as an issue that undermines the fundamental human rights of millions, because it is rooted in social stigma and a lack of understanding associated with mental disorders.

The discussions that followed at the London forum centred around the burden that depression poses on society, the need for new advances in treatment and access to care, the challenge of depression in the workplace and how stakeholders from all levels of society must come together to address of them.

Attendees of note included Louise Bradley, president and chief executive officer of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, who took part in a panel discussion on the impact of depression and mental illness to workplace health and the economy. Outlining the tools that exist to assist employers in Canada, Ms. Bradley discussed The National Standard of Canada for a Psychologically Safe and Healthy Workplace, along with its recently released implementation guide. Conference attendees recognized the guide as a useful tool for all employers, both large and small, private and public.

Many organizations are unaware of the effect on their bottom line as a result of mental illnesses and their co-occurrence with other physical chronic diseases which contribute to and compounds the cost of health care, absences, and disability claims. Employees with a mental illness are absent twice as long as employees without one. They affect job performance as well, which can cost a company as much as 12 per cent of payroll in lost productivity.

A recent global workplace survey conducted by Ipsos Mori, including employees and employers in Canada, demonstrated these realities in detail: Of the workers reporting a depression diagnosis, 40 per cent stated that they did not tell their employer about their problem, which is above the global average of 33 per cent and is the highest rate recorded in the global survey next to the United States (58 per cent).
Research has shown that organizations that implement psychologically healthy and safe workplace strategies are on average better performers in all categories from health and safety to key human resource measures to shareholder returns. Efforts to implement the National Standard of Canada (a voluntary set of guidelines), are critical to protecting the psychological well-being of employees.

Canada is already at the forefront of helping to address depression with the National Standard being the first of its kind in the world, but we have more to be proud of:

- The establishment of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, which has become internationally recognized for its work;
- A groundbreaking report published by Mental Health International, entitled Brain Health in a Brain Economy: Breaking Through, is recognized worldwide;
- A host of distinguished Canadians, recognized globally as leading thinkers in the field of mental illness, including: Dr. Anthony Phillips (Scientific director for neuroscience at the Canadian Institutes for Health Research); Dr. Roger McIntyre (recognized by Thomson Reuters as one of the world’s top innovative thinkers in the field of mood and cognitive disorders); Bill Wilkerson (chairman of UK-EU initiative entitled Target Depression in the Workplace; Dr. Remi Quirion (world-leading schizophrenia expert); Dr. Zul Merali (creator of an international network of scientists seeking a cure for depression).

We have great momentum, so now is the time for us to “co-ordinate the assault” and take action to help change the face of mental health in our country. Workplaces can now participate in the Wealth Management Mental Health at Work Challenge, a program that serves as a road map for organizations in any sector to encourage, support and implement exemplary mental health-related programs in their workplace.

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