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Service helps doctors spot pediatric mental health issues

CALGARY – Many family doctors and other health professionals around the province are now better equipped to provide care for children and teens with mental health concerns thanks to an Alberta Health Services program that's unique in Canada.

The Healthy Minds/Healthy Children Continuing Professional Development Program allows primary care providers free access to web-based, pediatric mental health courses at any time. Last year, more than 300 health professionals throughout the province paid \$50 each to participate in at least one online course.

Starting this year, the courses are offered free for all Alberta health care providers.

“By making the service free, it demonstrates AHS’s commitment to community capacity building in the children’s mental health arena,” says Dr. Sally Perry-Maclean, a program staff member.

According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, about 20 per cent of Canadians under the age of 18 have some sort of mental health issue. To differentiate between potentially concerning symptoms and normal, age appropriate child development can be challenging.

“Early assessment and intervention is crucial when identifying and treating any concern which may evolve into a more serious or long term mental illness,” Perry-MacLean says.

This supplementary training has the potential to affect the lives of tens of thousands of Alberta children, says program manager Harold Lipton.

“If we recognize mental health issues in kids and intervene successfully, not only are we helping kids, which intrinsically is good, we may be heading off problems in adulthood,” Lipton says.

Lipton adds many family doctors aren’t trained to identify or treat mental health issues, but they are often the primary or only contact families have with the health care system.

“This means children with mental health issues could slip through the system and not receive any specialized care,” he says. “This is worrisome because we know that 50 per cent of adult-based mental health issues have their start in childhood.”

Calgary family physician Dr. Margaret Churcher believes she has a better knowledge base that will have an effect on her care of her young patients since she began participating in the mental health courses in 2003, when the Healthy Minds/Healthy Children Outreach Service was launched.

“Now I’m really aware with what mental issues are out there, affecting kids,” says Dr. Churcher. “Mental health is like everything else: if it’s not picked up early, it just gets worse.”

The service offers approximately 16 courses annually on a wide range of topics, including pharmacology, emotional regulation and grief. The courses focus on identification, assessment and intervention tools and strategies, and they all meet the accreditation criteria of the College of Family Physicians of Canada, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, the Canadian Counselling Association, and the Alberta College of Social Workers.

The courses are delivered using adult education software, which allows presenters to prepare and narrate over Powerpoint slides. Learners access the modules on their own schedules, and modules are available 24/7 for one full month. Learners also post questions, share personal success stories, and discuss course content with presenters. Our presenters are acknowledged experts in their specific fields, and include university instructors, frontline practitioners, and out of province specialists. Topics of interest are requested by participants, and presenters recruited based on these requests.

Similar programs launched this year in British Columbia and Quebec, however, they focus on adult mental health.

The Healthy Minds/Healthy Children Outreach Service is provided by AHS in partnership with the faculties of social work and medicine at the University of Calgary.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than 3.7 million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

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