

“...and protect us from all anxiety.”

By AUSTIN MARDON

Special to the WCR

One of the most difficult issues that a family can face is mental illness. When a member of the family has a serious physical illness, the family's friends, neighbours, and fellow parishioners rally around the family with support.

When the illness is schizophrenia, that show of support can quickly evaporate. A mother who is told her child has such a serious mental illness begins a lifelong journey down a path that few follow. The dreams that every mother has for her child of education, career, marriage, and children can seem to be at an end. Hope and faith can be casualties.

Twenty per cent of the population will get a mental illness at some point in their lives. Mental illness is a serious medical condition. Membership in a faith community can mean the difference between hopelessness and a burden that can be carried.

Some sobering aspects of schizophrenia are that it effects one per cent of the population: 40 per cent of schizophrenics attempt suicide and 10 per cent succeed. It is characterized by hallucinations, delusions and changes to the appearance of emotions for two-thirds of people who suffer with it. It will require lifelong adherence to medication.

When relapse occurs in the majority of cases, it is caused by not taking medication faithfully. Catholic faith communities can best support a schizophrenic to stay well by reinforcing that they take their medication.

The Schizophrenia Society of Canada (SSC) (1-888-772-4673) and the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) (1-416-484-7750) are the two major national advocacy and support societies for those families and sufferers of schizophrenia across Canada.

Dr. John Gray, president of SSC, says, “Schizophrenia is now known to be an illness of the brain which is treatable. For many people to stay well after initial treatment they need encouragement to stay on the medications.”

Robert Campbell, national president of CMHA, says schizophrenia is a chronic disease and can be managed through proper medication and community supports.

These two national mental health agencies believe the Church can help mentally ill people by providing support and encouraging families to seek early treatment.

Edmonton Archbishop Thomas Collins says it is important that the schizophrenic and their families be included in the life of the church.

"All churches should try to learn and understand mental illness and reach out to include the suffers and their families in Church life," Collins said. "Schizophrenia is a serious real illness that should elicit sympathy rather than fear."

I recently published an article in the archdiocesan in-house publication Inter Nos that is sent to every priest in the archdiocese. The article gave guidance to priests ministering to schizophrenics who have gone off their anti-psychotic medications. They should be urged to seek medical as well as spiritual counsel.

It is extremely important that schizophrenics take their anti-psychotic medication. It is comparable to a diabetic taking insulin. Both are chronic diseases that need lifelong medical monitoring, adherence to medication regimes and occasional hospitalizations. Non-compliance can mean disability or death.

I had received three university degrees and been an Antarctic explorer before suffering a psychotic break from schizophrenia in 1992. Since being diagnosed with schizophrenia, I have received three decorations, been published in over 100 publications included Nature and Science, and authored several books.

I have also received a distance learning PhD in geography in spite of my schizophrenia. I have been able to accomplish much in my life due because I have faithfully taken my medication.

Authorities estimate that about 30 per cent of the homeless population has a serious mental illness. This is a large number of people in Edmonton where 1,900 people are absolutely homeless.

How much lost potential is there to our society due to a lack of adherence to medication and/or treatment by this population suffering from schizophrenia? How many are needlessly lost to the tragedy of schizophrenia? Would Christ reject them as we sometimes do?

(Austin Albert Mardon is a member of the Schizophrenia Society of Canada and Canadian Mental Health Association.)

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