

Ex-CEO leads fight against mental illness

John Mayberry lends his support to Web-based tool



John Mayberry, former Dofasco CEO: "I used to say to our director of human resources, 'How do we help these people?' "

Diane Francis, Financial Post

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Dofasco Inc.'s retired chief executive, John Mayberry, has taken to heart the corporation's motto: "Our product is steel, our strength is people."

He became involved in a breakthrough online tool that is designed to provide employees, and their doctors, with an accurate way to diagnose and treat mental illnesses.

"It shocked me the number of employees who had mood disorders, bipolar or stress-related problems, depression -- you name it. And I never felt they were treated properly by the medical profession," he said in an interview. "I used to say to our director of human resources, 'How do we help these people?' "

Mr. Mayberry was approached last year at a conference on mental illness by Dr. Sam Ozersky, an eminent Toronto psychiatrist. He and 20 other psychiatrists have worked several years devising this Web-based tool found on Feelingbetternow.com. Their company is called Mensante Corp. and Dr. Ozersky is founder and CEO. Mr. Mayberry is on its advisory board.

Their service was launched recently and is only accessible to employees of corporations that subscribe. But already, three blue-ribbon clients have signed on. Dofasco's workforce is covered, as are the 43,000 employees of the Toronto-Dominion Bank and thousands more health-care workers in British Columbia, insured by Health Care Benefits Trust.

Feelingbetternow does not replace the Employee Assistance Programs that are widespread in the workplace, but it is a critical supplement targeting mental illnesses.

"The reason this service is needed is because people don't like talking about mental illness, or else they have psychosomatic symptoms that are really related to mental health issues and don't know it," Mr. Mayberry said.

"There's the issue of stigma, symptoms which are confused with physical disorders, inadequate time at a doctor's office and the scarcity of doctors in general," he said. "The College of Family Physicians in Canada has endorsed this site."

The statistics are alarming.

"About 72% of people with mental disorders don't get any health care to address their problems in a given year and yet 80% would have visited a family physician in that time," he said. "Bipolar disorder usually takes 15 years to diagnose."

Mental illness is, by far, the biggest single health-care issue.

"There are 3,000 suicides a year in Canada and 95% are due to mental disorders that are untreated," he said. "One in 10 persons have mental disorders that are diagnosable."

The site is easy to use.

Employees are given an access code -- use a nickname for anonymity and can visit the site at home. They are evaluated based on their answers to a series of questions. A detailed assessment is performed online.

Feelingbetternow is designed to detect bipolar disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress, panic, anxiety, social anxiety, obsessive-compulsive behaviour and alcohol abuse, among other disorders.

Users are told whether they have symptoms matching an illness. Then they can print out, to take to their family doctors, a "diagnostic risk map." In addition, they can print out a "care map" outlining appropriate prescriptions and other treatments based on best practices by the psychiatric profession.

"This ensures that the patient and his or her physician will know the gold standard," said Dr. Ozersky.

The users are encouraged to take these maps to their family doctors, who will examine the documents (and the individuals) to devise appropriate treatments. The site also provides a follow-up service so individuals can chart their progress or reassess their situation along with their physician.

"It's prevention, diagnosis, treatment and follow-up based on best practices in terms of medications," said Dr. Ozersky. "It's a complete mental health-management system."

The system costs pennies per worker per day.

"Studies show that \$1,000 per employee per year is lost directly due to productivity losses or absenteeism due to mental disorders," said Dr. Ozersky.

"This system costs \$3 to \$6 per life per year. And if we improve outcomes two-thirds of 1%, the company breaks even. It's a no-brainer."

Workers covered under the Mensante system will also soon be offered a Web-based system of cognitive behaviour therapy -- a necessary part of treatment.

"So that even if you can't afford a psychiatrist or don't have an Employee Assistance Program [providing confidential counselling] you can get treatment," Mr. Mayberry said. "People with mental illnesses need medication and at least 15 sessions of cognitive behaviour therapy. This is not just medication-focused treatment."

Dr. Ozersky has been practising psychiatry in Canada for years and has been frustrated at the failure to meet the need.

"This leverages the capacity of any health-care system to optimize prevention, diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders. It addresses the profound gaps in dealing with these illnesses," he said.

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