Fact Sheet

Summary: A Literature Review on Depression Among Women: Focusing on Ontario

Depression is a vital public health issue that may impact quality of life, diminish overall health and well-being, and result in an economic burden on the individual, society and third party payers. The World Health Organization predicts that unipolar depression will be the second leading cause of disease burden in developed countries by the year 2020. This literature review focuses on the psychological and social factors that make women more vulnerable to depression compared to men by assessing relevant works (both academic and grey literature) on women and depression for prevalence, with particular attention to Ontario.

Why is the issue of depression among women significant?
Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, with more than 121 million people currently affected. The 12 month prevalence of depression in Ontario is 6% for women and 3% for men. Female adolescents and young adults (15-25 years old) have the highest rates of depression. The biggest challenges are: identifying those experiencing depression and ensuring that treatment guidelines for depression are appropriate – this should, but rarely does, include gender; translating clinical practice guidelines and best practices into the provision of mental health services; ensuring that the public is informed about available services and how to access them; and a lack of insurance coverage, especially for at-risk populations.

Who is most at risk for depression?
According to the review, women who are at higher risk for depression and face barriers to care include; adolescent girls, lone mothers, women with a history of child abuse and/or those who experience intimate partner violence, aboriginal women, ethnic minority and immigrant women, homeless women, non-heterosexual women, underemployed women, and women with lower socioeconomic status.

What is the purpose of the review?
This review increases knowledge of women and depression, especially in higher risk populations, and the barriers that women face in accessing services. This information can assist researchers who are seeking to better understand how populations access mental health services, and policymakers who are setting priorities for programs and services.

How is this relevant?
Evaluating depression through a gender lens is essential for understanding depression in the mental health context. Senator Kirby's *Out of the Shadows at Last* was an excellent first step, but there is still work to be done around understanding how the social determinants of health impact on women's experiences of mental illness and mental health services.

Barriers to mental health care in high-risk populations need to be addressed. According to the review, currently there is a lack of evidence-based best-practices for screening, prevention and treatment; structural issues including wait times and physician shortages; lack of continuity of care, and wide spread misperceptions on mental health.

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