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JIM VIBERT: Spike in suicides feared as restrictions continue

Jim Vibert

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A Nova Scotian psychologist says he's seen more suicide attempts in the past three months than in the previous five years, and he blames the continuing COVID-19 lockdown for the spike.

Dr. Simon Sherry and other mental health professionals in Nova Scotia are becoming increasingly concerned about the steep psychological toll that social isolation and heightened economic anxiety are exacting from Nova Scotians, as the restrictions on everyday life drag on.

The provincial government has settled into a “deceptively simple narrative” that overemphasizes the risk from COVID-19 and virtually ignores the damage to Nova Scotians' mental health, Dr. Sherry said.

“Our government is suffering from COVID-19 tunnel vision,” he said. “Their attention is too narrowly focused on COVID-19. Premier (Stephen) McNeil should also acknowledge and communicate the risks and the harms arising from its COVID-19 mitigation efforts.”

A Nova Scotian psychiatrist, who asked to remain anonymous, said it's time to get out of “panic mode” and get people back to functioning as normally as possible, safely and while protecting those most vulnerable to COVID-19.

Dr. Sherry echoed that sentiment, adding that there needs to be more flexibility and a whole lot more urgency behind the province's action to ease restrictions on work, school and recreation.

Nova Scotians get regular briefings on all things COVID-19 — the number of cases, deaths, tests and recoveries — but the other side of the equation, the damage to mental health, to livelihoods, to kids' education, simply isn't accounted for.

There needs to be something like a cost-benefit analysis of the government's COVID-19 mitigation strategy, Dr. Sherry said.

What we've seen so far from the government only highlights the benefits — the restrictions have flattened the COVID curve — and strategically ignores the terrible cost continuing with those restrictions is inflicting on people's mental well-being.

Dr. Sherry says separating workers from employment, children from schools, family from each other, and people from recreation is “massively compromising” Nova Scotians' mental health.

The professor in the department of psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University modelled the impact of unemployment and underemployment during the pandemic on suicide rates in Nova Scotia.

His model suggests more Nova Scotians will die by suicide in 2020 than ever before, with the suicide rate increasing from 15 per 100,000 people in 2018 to an estimated 23

per 100,000 people in 2020. That's an increase of about 62 per cent and could mean 86 more Nova Scotians will die by suicide this year.

And Dr. Sherry only modelled suicides attributable to unemployment and underemployment. Other factors, like isolation, depression, and substance abuse, may push Nova Scotia's suicide numbers even higher.

To control the spread of the coronavirus, the provincial government believes it is erring on the side of caution but, Dr. Sherry said, a too cautious approach to easing restrictions heightens other risks.

"Isolation, confinement, sedentariness, and unemployment are corroding Nova Scotian's mental health," he said. "Child abuse, domestic violence, and marital breakdown are real risks during the pandemic. And people are also vulnerable to suicide and drug overdose, alcohol misuse, and depression in these circumstances."

Dr. Sherry said Nova Scotia's initial response to the coronavirus threat was rational but, three months later, we know a lot more about the virus and we've seen a lot more of the effects of the lockdown.

Together those factors suggest it is time to move forward quickly and ease restrictions with some urgency.

He said Nova Scotians will overcome their fears of COVID-19 when they face them, when the impediments to resuming a relatively normal life are removed, and when the messaging changes away from one that stokes those fears.

"We need to stop pretending our current circumstances are safe and that our best option is to slowly emerge from this so-called 'safe place,'" Dr. Sherry said.

He said too many Nova Scotians are not safe at home with a moribund economy, and the province needs to start pushing the pace of recovery or "the cure will be worse than the virus."

Need help? Here's how to get it

- Nova Scotia's mental health page has information and links to a variety of resources, including those offered through the health-care system and community partners
- If people need to reach out for mental health and addictions services or programs in Nova Scotia, they can call Central Intake at 1-855-922-1122.

- Information on other mental health supports is offered by NSHA, including the Mental Health Crisis Line (1-888-429-8167), available 24-7.
- Information about services and supports for children and youth is offered through the IWK.
- A nationally available online mental health portal Wellness Together Canada.
- For emergencies, people should call 911 or go to their nearest emergency room.