

# MENTAL HEALTH DISABILITY SOLUTIONS THAT WORK

**M**ental health is the leading cause of disability in Canada, accounting for 30 per cent of claims and 70 per cent of costs. Yet many Canadians don't seek the help they need because of barriers like stigma. When they do seek help, access to treatment is often a challenge, making a quick recovery and safe return to work major concerns for employees and their employers.

Since the onset of COVID-19, the mental wellbeing of Canadians has suffered – further underscoring the need for better access to treatment resources. Fortunately, there are new and innovative treatment solutions available to mitigate the pandemic's impact on mental health.

**• Key Takeaways**

These were some of the key takeaways from a recent *Benefits and Pensions Monitor* Meetings & Events webinar *Mental Health Always Matters: Proven Disability Solutions for the Pandemic and Beyond*. The webinar, featuring Medavie Blue Cross and Medaca Health Group, focused on current disability management trends in mental health and solutions the two companies have introduced to their clients, plan members and partners.

**• Productivity Losses**

Travis Kelly, Medavie Blue Cross's new Regional Director, Business Development in Ontario and former Director of Group Disability Management Operations, noted that on any given day a half million Canadian employees are struggling with mental health issues. They are coming to the workplace or calling in sick due to stress, anxiety, and depression. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, lost productivity due to absenteeism and presenteeism totalled \$20 billion a year. "Put another way, that's 14 per cent of an organization's net annual profits, so that's a bottom-line number there," Kelly says.

With restrictions and uncertainties related to COVID-19 taking a toll on people's mental health, these numbers are likely on the rise.

**• Wait Times**

Access to treatment is a fundamental he-

alth care issue with Canadians continuing to experience lengthy wait times to see a psychiatrist. On average, it takes six months to start treatment by a psychiatrist in urban areas and 12 months in non-urban areas.

"This means highly-treatable illnesses such as depression and anxiety are left untreated, prolonging recovery and a healthy return to work," says Chris Anderson, President of Medaca.

**• Direct, Indirect Costs**

"The direct disability costs are just the tip of the iceberg," Kelly notes. "There are indirect costs above the surface, especially lost productivity due to presenteeism — those folks who show up and work at 50 per cent of their capacity because of their illness. There is also the impact on 'those that are left behind'. If one person on a 10-member team goes out on disability, the work now needs to be done by nine, which is going to take a toll on them, their health, and their productivity."

**• Early Intervention, Integrated Services**

Since 2012, Medavie Blue Cross and Medaca have been working together to help employees benefit from the fastest access to psychiatrists available in the marketplace. Indeed, through their early intervention psychiatric service, treatment can get started eight days after a referral is approved.

In 2018, Medavie and Medaca partnered to deliver an integrated service that brings together virtual psychiatry and psychotherapy — considered the gold standard in mental health care. The two treatment modalities are sequenced tightly so the professionals share treatment recommendations and work together with the family physician to assist with recovery.

**• First in Marketplace**

"Medavie now has the capability to provide employees with the right treatment by the right professional at the right time," says Chris Anderson, President of Medaca. "There is a strong working partnership between the psychiatrist, therapist and family physician with a focus on return to work.

This is a powerful solution and Medavie was the first in the marketplace to offer it."

The way Kelly sees it, everybody is on a health continuum. "We want people healthy, and more, we want them to be able to self care so they can stay at work, but still get the help that they need."

Anderson says mental illness in its clinical form is a medical illness. "It needs to be treated as quickly as possible just in the same way you would treat cancer or heart disease or diabetes."

**• Changes in Environment, Mindset**

Fortunately, the environment for employees struggling with a clinical mental illness has changed. They have been able to access and benefit from effective wellness management training and employee assistance programs. In addition, the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace has raised awareness about the issue and reduced stigma.

As for the future of mental health in the workplace, Kelly and Anderson say the employer mindset about mental health is shifting. In the past, organizations viewed mental illness as a cost to be managed. Today, more and more employers are looking at total mental health as a key contributor to organizational performance. It's a significant transition from cost irritant to performance driver.

