



HSA activist awarded for excellence

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by LAURA BUSHEIKIN



Although he couldn't have known it, youth and family counsellor Lee Chernoff was already preparing for his career while in elementary school. And he clearly chose well: Chernoff was declared a Healthcare Hero earlier this summer.

"When I was about 11 or 12, I would check out mental health textbooks from our local library and copy the chapter quizzes in advance of reading," he said. "Once I had studied the text thoroughly, I'd sit the exam at grandma's kitchen table with her acting as a proctor. I still have definitions memorized from those early pseudo-exams!"

His early fascination has translated into a career as a Youth and Family Counsellor on a 10-bed child psychiatry unit at BC Children's Hospital, where he has been employed for the past 11 years.

Until fairly recently "youth and family counsellor" was not recognized as a profession, Chernoff said.

"This is a newly emergent profession in BC, one which was formally recognized as meeting paramedical criteria by the BC Labour Relations Board in 2006. This decision marked our entrance as a group into HSA," he said, clearly pleased. He can also be proud ... he had an instrumental role in achieving this decision, through his role as BCCH communications representative during the campaign for reclassification.

Lee Chernoff Youth and Family Counsellor BC Children's Hospital

Once that campaign was successful, Chernoff accepted the role of HSA steward.

"Joining the community of fellow health science professionals in HSA has been akin to a professional homecoming," he says. "There are certain virtues that we all share ... compassion for one ... otherwise we wouldn't be doing the work we do. [We also share] a commitment to excellence in our respective health science occupations and sustained advocacy for public health care."

Chernoff's own commitment to excellence and advocacy earned him an Excellence in BC Healthcare Award as a Healthcare Hero in June of this year. The award is presented by the Health Employers Association of BC to recognize the efforts of healthcare employees who provide quality care and support to the people of this province." Chernoff was nominated by his colleagues at BCCH.

The nomination expresses his team's appreciation of Chernoff's leadership: "As our elected delegate, Lee documented and articulated our aspirations to both management and our trade union, facilitating the lengthy process that ended with the fortunate result of our reclassification as paramedical professionals," it states. It also praises Chernoff's commitment to the clinical development of his profession, and above all, it commends

his work with his young clients.

-Lee fosters opportunities for profound, sustained and life-long change. The positive impact of this hopeful process on childrens developing self-esteem, self-determination and hope for the future cannot be overstated," writes Chernoffs co-worker, Douglas Herasymuik.

The children Chernoff works with range from five to 12 years old. They are challenging cases.

-These are the most acute kids in the province; they are referred down to us after exhausting community mental health. About 60 to 70 per cent struggle with ADHD and have a co-occurring mood and/or anxiety disorder. Many, additionally, have deficits in the areas of language and learning. All have significant behavioural challenges, often including aggression, that have been interfering with their success at school, home and in the community. Early intervention is critical as the course of these conditions and degree of disability tends to worsen with age."

Typically, a child stays in the unit for one month. Chernoff says his goal during that time is to create -practical, measurable change in the childs level of functioning through contingency management, skills training, and psychoeducation ... all within the context of a therapeutic relationship that fosters trust, respects individuality, and honours patients rights."

The youth and family counsellors at BC Childrens Hospital also work closely with parents and caregivers to give them skills for better relationships with their child.

Chernoff loves the challenges and rewards of his job. -Each new child and family poses a unique clinical challenge. Behavioural assessment and crafting individualized treatment interventions are akin to solving a puzzle by configuring the pieces in such a way that a positive future comes into view. Being able to be a small part of fostering that future is deeply satisfying," he says.

It can also be emotionally exhausting. Chernoff is mindful of the risk of vicarious trauma and burnout. -One of the greatest challenges arises from the expectations a clinician brings to their work. The Serenity Prayer, widely used in AA circles, articulates an essential aspect of that wisdom which a mental health professional must seek to constantly cultivate if she or he is to have productivity and longevity in the field."

Chernoff developed much of that wisdom early in life. His mother, Donna Widsten, is an HSA member and a psychiatric nurse who managed a family care home throughout Chernoffs adolescence.

-The people who came to live with us were fully integrated into our family life," he says. -Most suffered with a chronic schizophrenic illness and came from seriously traumatic backgrounds. We ate together, did chores together, spent holidays and, occasionally, argued ... as all families do. These years were pivotal in shaping my understanding of the humanity and dignity of people with serious mental illness as well as exposing me to the real challenges and occasional heartbreak that the road to rehabilitation can hold."

Chernoff remembers being stimulated by the literature his mother read. -There were many books around, from Freuds Interpretation of Dreams to Bernes Games People Play, and books on social deviance. I felt like a kid in a candy shop."

His early love of studying mental health has not abated. His move to night shift was partly motivated by his desire for more study time.

-I try to study diligently, to keep up on the literature, and also to be a clinical resource for the team. My passion is for evidence-based practice. In the provision of mental health therapy, theres often a tendency for things to be driven by personal philosophy or theoretical training rather than by what is the best evidence for treating different problems. Continual reform needs to be made in closing this critical gap between the best empirical research available and day-to-day clinical practice."

In some ways, not much has changed for Chernoff since the days when he sat for selfdirected exams at his grandmas kitchen table.

The big difference now is that his passion and diligence are creating positive change in the world, improving his clients lives and enhancing the professional recognition and clinical development of his peers. 

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180 East Columbia
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website
www.hsabc.org

Telephone 604-517-0994
1-800-663-2017