

Depressed sector

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Compassion alone would be reason enough for the federal public service, the biggest employer in Ottawa, to address the problem of depression that appears to afflict many of its workers. But there's another incentive: mental illness has a huge price tag attached to it, as measured in lost productivity and other costs.

The federal government spends \$600 million on health benefits -- with half of its claims tied to depression. Indeed, the illness seems to be everywhere, whether you work for government or not. Depression is considered to be the fastest-growing source of workplace disability, and the overall economic costs run into the tens of billions. About one in five Canadians suffers from this scourge.

It is alarming that public servants seem to be particularly vulnerable, and it's a good thing that the government provides a generous health plan that allows sufferers to obtain treatment, be it medication or therapy. But there is even more that the government could do, and that is to support a new depression research centre in Ottawa.

The centre is a project of the University of Ottawa Institute of Mental Health Research. Because Ottawa is home to a large workplace -- the federal public service -- that is known to have high rates of depression, it's fitting that a research institute for the disease be established here. The public service could serve as an ideal research population for the development not just of treatments but of workplace strategies and policies that could be adopted in other sectors.

As one mental health advocate put it, Ottawa can go from being the "depression capital of Canada" to the "depression research capital of Canada."

The federal government can help itself, and others, by getting behind this important new medical initiative at the University of Ottawa.

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