

Mental Health International
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July 2, 2021

To: Honourable Blaine Higgs,
Premier of New Brunswick

From: Bill Wilkerson, LL. D. (Hon)

Re: Horizon Health Network', Patricia Borthwick and her daughter's death in the care of Saint John Regional Hospital

Premier, on April 28, you kindly wrote me to advise that that you are "listening and taking action" with respect to our concerns as to how Horizon Health failed to respond in a courteous, compassionate and timely manner to the questions for information posed by Patricia Borthwick, a resident of Utopia, N.B., pursuant to the death by suicide of her daughter while in the care of Saint John Regional Hospital. Your letter was in reply to mine of April 6, 2021.

As you may recall, I am a national and international mental health advocate and proponent of suicide prevention, I am advising Patty on a pro bono, personal basis as I do from time to time in support of families contending with mental health crisis and, frequently, the liability-aware nature of how health care institutions communicate with families of patients.

In the matter of Patty's daughter, the first response she got from the regional hospital person is that they couldn't answer her questions because of privacy rules. The privacy of her deceased daughter. This absurdity triggered my serious concern about the competence and integrity of this hospital relative to psychiatric care.

True to form, through its Vice-President, Quality and Patient-Centred Care – an ironic 'corporate title' for the executive corresponding with Patty in this matter – Horizon sent a June 22nd letter to Patty, the salutation referencing "'Ms. Patricia Borthwick,' a clear signal of a form letter, in which they give this grieving mother a powerfully-arrogant and detailed explanation of the legal reasons they cannot respond to her mother's questions about her daughter's violent death.

For one thing, they differentiate between the mother of the deceased young woman and who purportedly qualifies as a "personal representative" of Hillary's estate with or without a will. Superbly ironic, since the hospital accepted Patty as sufficiently "personal" and sufficiently "representative" to be the source of next-of-kin permission to remove her daughter from life support.

But the organization sees her as too distant to qualify for information that would be otherwise and legally available to some “personal representative.” This legalistic, bureaucratic, fearful (liability concerns, no doubt) and cruel letter merely sustains the tone and demeanor of how the hospital and Horizon have treated this woman and her grieving family.

On March 30, 2021, the Minister of Health said in a letter to Patty that “in light of these tragic events, I have directed the Department of Health staff and the regional health authorities to address crisis care in emergency departments and in communities. Furthermore, I have asked for recommendations within 30 days.”

The Minister also said “I have asked the Executive Director of the Addiction and Mental Health Branch at the Department of Health, Annie Pellerin, to ensure that someone from the Department reaches out to you directly.” I can tell you, despite the Minister’s promise, Patricia Borthwick heard from no-one.

Therefore, six months after Hillary’s death and several more months of trying to get information about her daughter’s death plus two months after the Minister of Health’s letter to Patty, she received a MAY 21ST letter from Horizon’s Vice-President of Community, Jean Daigle in which she is advised that:

“The following two recommendations were approved by our quality-of-care committee and action plans are being developed for their implementation.” That is, the hospital will:

1. “Investigate procuring ligature resistant door frames, designs or door design for inpatient psychiatry units.”
2. “Investigate the establishment of a Crisis Stabilization Unit for increased structure and observation for patients in crisis requiring short-term intervention.”

Horizon Admission and Revelation Justifies Provincial Supervision

This is a revelation: the hospital knows that certain deficiencies likely contributed to Hillary’s death and, to the outside observer, these deficiencies seem so fundamental, so basic to the safety of psychiatric services as to warrant a provincial investigation into Horizon’s capacity to provide such services. I encourage you, Premier, to consider putting Saint John Regional under supervision,

Further, neither the hospital management nor Horizon should be left to their own devices in carrying out the “investigations” of which Daigle speaks. I would encourage you to oversee these inquiries and to audit the Horizon Health Network ‘s competence and informativeness in managing psychiatric crisis.

Suicide Risk for the Family

It seems entirely plausible that Horizon and the Saint John Regional Hospital management – given the distant and evasive manner in which they have treated Patty Borthwick – is unaware that high on the list of suicide risk factors is losing to suicide a family member or a person close to you. The frustration generated by their behavior compounds such a risk

Suicide Risk for the Province

As of 2012, as you also know, New Brunswick had the highest ‘per population’ rate of suicides among Canada’s ten provinces and was the 6th worst jurisdiction in the world after Japan, Belgium, Finland, France and Austria. New Brunswick also experiences high rates of domestic violence.

Suicide Prevention: A Priority in New Brunswick?

Under these circumstances, one would presume that suicide prevention and suicidal crisis management would be at the top of the list in all mental health clinics and services in New Brunswick but especially acute care general hospitals which provide side-bar psychiatric care.

At the very least, I would question whether you can rely on the Saint John Regional Hospital and other Horizon facilities to master these requirements based on this experience and perhaps other incidents of which I have become aware.

The number of suicides in N.B. have topped the national average consistently, nearly 16 deaths per 100,000 persons at its worst, based on data I have seen, thus establishing your otherwise lovely province as a world-scale suicide capital.

And now, years after the province emerged as a leading jurisdiction in suicide incidence, we have a major urban hospital and health management company “investigating” whether the basics of door design and observational capacity are suitable for their psychiatric wing.

This certainly supports the Minister of Health’s directive for a review of emergency psychiatric services. I understand the Minister announced a strategy but, again, no one – zero – reached out to Patty despite the Minister’s promise they would do so.

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Therefore, sir, I strongly recommend – and will be making a public statement along these lines -
- that you convene an investigation into the policies, practices, training and competencies of
the Saint John Regional Hospital in their handling of this particular suicide and the tragic
circumstances surrounding it.

I submit, sir, that New Brunswick could lead Canada toward an effective, solid model of suicide
prevention. This is not beyond reach.

A personal note if I may: it would be very nice – thoughtful and welcomed – if you were to call
Patricia Borthwick at 506-755-0881. The family would welcome hearing that you are taking
steps so that Hillary will not have died in vain, that her death will bring about changes that will
save the lives of others.

Meanwhile, Patty has just received the coroner's report officially advising that her daughter's
death was asphyxiation at her own hand. This is, on one level, a step toward closure. On
another, it is the cold re-confirmation that her daughter is never coming home.

Best Regards,
(not signed, sent electronically)
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Full Text and accompanying 'News Release' available at:
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