Research on psychological impact of shooting at Dawson College sheds light on post-traumatic disorders; yields recommendations and SECURE intervention program

MONTREAL, September 9, 2010—A research team from the McGill University Health Centre (MUHC) and Fernand-Seguin Research Centre of Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital presented today the results of its three-year study, a world first, into the 2006 Dawson College shooting to the Government of Quebec’s Ministry of Public Security. The incidence of psychosocial trauma caused by a school shooting far outnumbers physical cases. Close to 1,000 students and employees attending or working at the College at the time of the tragedy were involved in this groundbreaking study.

"Despite over 60 school shootings since the 1999 tragedy at Columbine High School in Colorado, there have been few empirical studies on the psychological effects of these incidents and no study until now that evaluated the effectiveness of psychological intervention," says research team member Dr. Warren Steiner, Psychiatrist-in-Chief, MUHC Mental Health Mission. "It is crucial that we use what we’ve learnt from these experiences to improve the care available to those in need in the event that this should ever happen again."

The study’s main goals were to: 1) evaluate the effects of the psychological intervention plan set up immediately after the shooting, including an audit of the services offered; 2) evaluate the physical and mental health of students, teachers and support staff of Dawson College; and 3) develop a multimodal intervention program that would provide appropriate psychological support, evaluation and coordination.

Four detailed reports outline the psychological impact of the Dawson College shooting, review the medical response, make recommendations to educational institutions, hospitals, social services and the government, and propose a multimodal intervention program to be implemented through Quebec’s ministries and networks of justice, health, social services, education and public security should a similar incident occur in the future. This program is called SECURE or Support, Evaluation and Coordination United for Recovery and Education.

"A total of 30% of respondents experienced a psychological disorder, including post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression, alcohol dependence and social phobia — twice the percentage seen in a 2002 mental health survey of the Quebec population," says research team leader Dr. Alain Lesage of the Fernand-Seguin Research Centre of Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital and a professor of Psychiatry at the Université de Montréal. "People with pre-existing mental disorders experienced difficulty up to 18 months after the shooting. Overall, 13% of the College’s population sought professional help after the shooting, while another 14% accessed mental health information on the Internet."

"We found that the greater the severity of exposure to the shooting, the greater the risk of developing post-traumatic stress or other psychological disorders," says Dr. Stéphane Guay, Director of the Trauma Study Centre of Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital and a member of the research team. Dr. Guay, also a professor of criminology at the Université de Montréal, developed the scale of severity and degree of exposure to the shooting used in the survey that rated proximity from being wounded to being outside the College at the time.

The SECURE program recommends the creation of crisis-management teams and the deployment of government-designated crisis-intervention experts to work with these teams. SECURE also recommends the creation of proactive activities for public education on mental illness, promotion of healthy workplaces, and early detection programs in educational institutions for both students and staff in the hope that more people will be encouraged to seek help in the future, as the study found that some Dawson respondents were reluctant to seek help due to the fear of being stigmatized by colleagues, friends and loved ones.

"As with prior shooting incidents, the Dawson tragedy shook us deeply," adds MUHC Director General and CEO the Hon. Arthur T. Porter. "I am proud that MUHC professionals exercised leadership from the moment a Code Orange was called and since that day, working with colleagues and external partners to manage the trauma cases, conduct invaluable research and develop the SECURE program. Not only are Quebecers benefiting from their outstanding efforts, but so are people around the world."

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SECURE stresses the importance of integrating a psychosocial intervention program in hospital Code Orange (crisis response) plans following the model developed at the MUHC after the Dawson shooting. “The psychosocial intervention program at the MUHC is fully operational and ensures short- and long-term access to psychotherapy alongside physical trauma care,” confirms Dr. Nadia Szkrumelak, Associate Psychiatrist-in-Chief, MUHC, and a member of the research team.

“We hope that the Government of Quebec will adopt these reports’ recommendations and create a committee of experts to validate the multimodal program,” says Mr. André Lemieux, Director General of the Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital.

In presenting the four reports to the Government of Quebec, Dr. Pierre Bleau, who coordinated the research team and is the Medical Director of the Anxiety Disorders Program at the MUHC, thanked the Ministry of Justice for funding the research and the Research Institute of the MUHC for its support of the study. He underlined the importance of the participation and openness of the Dawson community, which allowed researchers to evaluate the psychological interventions and make recommendations to improve psychosocial responses in the future.

Richard Filion, Director General of Dawson College, set the tone early for his institution’s willingness to share its experience so that others might learn from it. In the first hours after the shooting and at more than 30 conferences across Canada and the United States over the past four years, he has said: “As a socially responsible learning institution, it is our duty to share our experience and the lessons we have learned so that other schools may have a chance to better cope with the human toll of these traumatic and violent acts.”

The shooting at Dawson College occurred on September 13, 2006. First-year student Anastasia De Sousa was killed and 16 others were injured. The shooter took his life. It was the fourth fatal school shooting in Montreal after the École Polytechnique massacre (1989), Valery Fabrikant shooting spree at Concordia University (1992) and a murder at the Yves-Thériault Centre (1997).

About Dawson College: Founded in 1968, Dawson College was the first English-language CEGEP in Quebec and is today the largest in the network with more than 10,000 full- and part-time students enrolled in 25 programs of study. The College employs some 1,000 teachers, support staff, professionals and administrators. www.dawsoncollege.qc.ca

About the McGill University Health Centre (MUHC): One of the world’s foremost academic health centres, the MUHC offers exceptional and integrated patient-centric care, research and teaching. Highly committed to the continuum of care in its community and affiliated with the Faculty of Medicine of McGill University, The Montreal Children's Hospital, the Montreal General Hospital, the Royal Victoria Hospital, the Montreal Neurological Hospital, the Montreal Chest Institute and the Lachine Hospital of the MUHC value multidisciplinary service throughout the lifespan, innovative technologies and practices, strategic partnerships and leadership in knowledge transfer. The MUHC is currently carrying out a $2.25-billion Redevelopment Project on three campuses—the Mountain, the Glen and Lachine—designed to provide healthcare professionals with an effective environment in which to ensure patients and their families benefit from The Best Care for Life. The campuses are also anchored in best sustainable-development practices, including LEED® and BOMA BEST guidelines. www.muhc.ca/construction

About the Research Institute of the McGill University Health Centre (RI MUHC) is a world-renowned biomedical and health-care hospital research centre. Research is organized by eleven research axes (or programs). Located in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, the Institute is the research arm of the McGill University Health Centre affiliated with the Faculty of Medicine at McGill University. The Institute supports over 600 researchers, over 1,800 graduate students and post-docs and fellows devoted to a broad spectrum of fundamental and clinical research. Over 1000 clinical research studies are conducted within our hospitals each year. The Research Institute of the MUHC is supported in part by the Fonds de la recherche en santé du Québec (FRSQ). www.muhc.ca/research/
About Fernand-Seguin Research Centre
The Fernand-Seguin Research Centre of Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital, along with its partners, Hôpital Rivière-des-Prairies and the Institut Philippe-Pinel de Montréal, is recognized by the Fonds de la recherche en santé du Québec. At the forefront of knowledge, it is one of the largest venues for clinical research in mental health in Francophone Canada. www.hlhl.qc.ca/recherche

About Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital
Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital provides specialized and ultraspecialized services in mental health. A leader in its field, it develops knowledge through research, teaching and assessment. Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital is a member of the Université de Montréal's extensive network of excellence in health.

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