UNB study finds younger caregivers experience depression, distress

Emma Davie the daily gleaner

A new study out of the University of New Brunswick found that caregivers of people with mental health or addictions issues are often younger and experience a higher level of caregiver burden.

Dr. Amanda Slaunwhite, a sociology postdoctoral fellow at UNB who worked on the study, said they used data from Statistics Canada’s 2012 General Social Survey.

Slaunwhite said they wanted to look at caregivers by the care-receiver’s illness, so whether the person being taken care of had a mental health or addictions issue, or if they were caring for an aging family member.

“We found that the caregivers who take care of a loved one or a family member or a friend with a mental health or addictions issue really had a different demographic composition than caregivers that we traditionally think of that take care of seniors,” Slaunwhite said in an interview.

“When you think of caregivers, you think of a person taking care of an elderly family member. But the caregivers looking after someone with addictions or mental health issues, they’re likely younger and the problems are usually quite chronic.”

Slaunwhite said these caregivers have higher levels of stress and a greater risk of depression.

“The fact that these caregivers are younger speaks to the development of the illness earlier in life, in that the care receivers aren’t elderly, they tend to be younger. So overall the people supporting them tend to be younger as well,” she said.

For the study, a caregiver was defined as someone who provided support, from driving someone to a doctor’s appointment to helping care for them at home.

“The most surprising result was the level of psychological distress,” Slaunwhite said.

“We knew they probably had greater caregiver burden, but the impact on their emotional health and their psychological well-being, I didn’t anticipate it would be so significant. So they’re much more likely to experience depression, but also use prescription drugs to help support them or deal with the burden.”

While it was a national study, Slaunwhite said it included data from New Brunswick.

“These trends are very likely in New Brunswick as well. There was nothing in our data to suggest there were regional variations in the reporting or the results.”

Slaunwhite, who is primarily a mental health and addictions researcher, said the results identified a key need among this population because they struggle the most.

“Especially with minimal mental health or addiction services available in some jurisdictions, caregivers can form a valuable piece of the social service infrastructure that we have. They really fill the gap where they aren’t formal care providers,” she said.

“It speaks to the need that we need to look into this further so that caregivers aren’t as vulnerable.”

Dr. Amanda Slaunwhite