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SCHIZOPHRENIA

NV woman laments mental health support

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IT'S been a year now since Halina Habooshen's brother jumped to his death from the Granville Street Bridge.

Habooshen remembers the last time she talked to her brother — she'd driven from North Vancouver to a park in Burnaby to meet him.

At that point in her brother's downward spiral into schizophrenia, Habooshen had no way to contact him. The van he'd been living in had been towed away. He had no address and no phone, so she relied on his sporadic phone calls to her.

"We're in a race against suicide. It's always on the horizon."

— Hershel Hardin, president, North Shore Schizophrenia Society

"He'd lost a lot of weight in the past year," she remembers. "He was literally on the street with his bike and his dog."

Habooshen told her brother she was going to be away for a week.

The day she got back, police came to her North Vancouver apartment to tell her that her brother, 53, had committed suicide.

Habooshen says that after a year, she's just able to talk about what happened.

Mostly, what she feels is anger towards a system she says prevented her from trying to help her brother who had been living with mental illness for decades.

"To me it's unthinkable it has to come to this," she says. "Everybody knew he was sick. It wasn't like my brother had nobody trying to help him."

But Habooshen says what she found is there is little to no support for families of people with mental illness.

Repeatedly she was told there was nothing that could be done for her brother unless he requested help himself — something Habooshen says he was clearly incapable of while in the grip of mental illness. She was told the only way he could be committed and given medication without his consent was if he was violent,

See Schizophrenia page **9**

Schizophrenia society says committal rules should be revised

From page **3**

to himself or other people. But that didn't happen — until the day he jumped.

Hershel Hardin, president of the North Shore Schizophrenia Society, said the wall that Habooshen ran up against in trying to get help for her brother is all too common in the mental health system.

It's a mythology that people need to be dangerous before they are committed, he said, but it's pervasive in the health system.

Partly as a result of Kwapiszewski's death, the society is now calling for a major overhaul of the way mental health cases are managed and an inquiry into the way his case was handled.

In the case of other major illnesses, "nobody who was falling desperately ill would be refused treatment," he said. But unless they are committed to hospital, severely mentally ill people often refuse the medication that can stabilize their condition.

All too often, like Habooshen's brother Marek Kwapiszewski, they end up taking their own lives.

The suicide rate for all serious mental illness is from 10 to 15 per cent, said Hardin. Half of those with schizophrenia will attempt suicide once in their lifetime.

For the families of those people, "We're in a race against suicide," said Hardin. "It's always on the horizon."

In Kwapiszewski's case, while he was on medication he was

Mother's death left man to go off meds

From page **9**

eccentric but still functioning, said Habooshen. He lived with their elderly mother, who kept the extent of his illness from other family members.

"She knew but she never spoke of it," said Habooshen. "It's a common taboo still in our society (as a whole) that mental illness is not to be talked about."

When their mother became seriously ill with cancer, he stopped taking his medication and her brother's condition began to deteriorate. After she died, it was a rapid downhill slide.

Kwapiszewski closed the family business that was his only source of income. He had paranoid delusions, believing that people were trying to poison him. He no longer answered the phone and lived in piles of garbage. The house that had been willed to him was eventually sold as a teardown.

He burned through more than $100,000 of his inheritance.

Eventually he began living in his van, resorting to having it towed from place to place when his driver's licence was suspended. He spent hours manically cycling through Stanley Park in the night.

"I'm hoping once everyone starts talking about it, we'll get over the taboo and we'll start getting help for the mentally ill."

— Halina Habooshen

Habooshen said she pleaded with medical authorities to help her brother, always with the same result.

"I couldn't get information because it's privacy and confidentiality," she said. "They wouldn't tell me anything."

"The mental health system said, 'No, he can manage himself.' I told them, 'He's living in a car. He's not managing.'"

She was told it was a lifestyle choice that her brother was living in a van.

Repeatedly she was told, "He has to come ask for help himself."

But being told to come in and make an appointment isn't realistic for someone who is severely mentally ill, said Hardin.

"The culture of mental health services has a problem," he said. In Kwapszewski's case and others like it, "They just didn't seem to know what they were dealing with."

Today Habooshen is talking about her brother's case in the hopes it will change the way mental illness is dealt with by the health system.

"I'm hoping once everyone starts talking about it, we'll get over the taboo and we'll start getting help for the mentally ill," she said.

"You so often hear you should be doing this or that. But there's nothing that you can plan," she said. "The illness has control of the behaviour."

A lot of people don't know what that really means," she said.

Habooshen said she's not optimistic that major change will happen soon in the mental health system. But "we have to keep raising the issue until something gets done."

"I feel I was kept away from helping my brother," she said. "That has to change."