

HEALTH

Sister tells story of man who jumped to his death

Health system failed to help man suffering from paranoia

BY PETE MCMARTIN
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If not for his sister, the story of Marek Kwapiszewski's life would have ended on June 29, 2008.

He committed suicide.

He jumped off the Granville Street Bridge.

And that story would have passed unnoticed, as suicides usually do, at least in the media.

But now, his sister, Halina Haboosheh, wants the story told. She wants it told, she said, because she feels the medical and mental health system utterly failed her brother, and not just once, but at least 16 times over a period of two years, when her repeated attempts to get help for him or have him committed failed.

"I can't help him now," Haboosheh said, "but I'd like to bring this to everybody's attention so maybe we can help the next person and all the other families that are in the same predicament."

That predicament has been a commonly recurring theme in B.C. Family members of persons with severe mental health problems complain about the difficulty of getting loved ones committed. They cite restrictive confidentiality rules that isolate the family member in need, or the difficulty of getting doctors

to agree to a committal or the system's unwillingness to commit a patient until it is too late.

In the case of Kwapiszewski — a diagnosed schizophrenic in his mid-50s and who lived on the North Shore — his sister was increasingly drawn into the tragedy of his spiralling mental health several months after their mother's death. A background paper prepared by the North Shore Schizophrenic Society detailed her attempts to get help:

"In the 20-month period from December, 2006 through to Mr. Kwapiszewski's suicide in 2008, Ms. Haboosheh — either directly or through her husband, Mr. Kwapiszewski's GP, a lawyer, and a North Shore mental health worker — contacted Vancouver mental health services 16 times, desperately trying to get them to intervene as her brother showed more and more troubling behavioural symptoms. Three letters were also filed as part of, or in conjunction with, those contacts, and some meetings were also involved. Ms. Haboosheh also called the Vancouver Police Department on three different occasions to report him missing. Of the 16 calls and other contacts, 10 were with Mental Health Emergency Services and six with the Midtown Mental Health Team. They consistently, however, declined to commit

Mr. Kwapiszewski for treatment, insisting he was non-committable. There was no mistaking his deterioration, however."

According to the NSSS background, Kwapiszewski showed paranoid delusions, believed people were trying to poison him, believed he was being followed, would no longer answer his phone and only call from a pay phone, spent exorbitant amounts of money from the sale of his mother's house (including \$140,000 that seems to have evaporated during a trip to Mexico), believed people were pumping gas into his suite, began sleeping in cars because he believed people were stealing from him, began to carry a stick for protection and became violent and combative, took to shaving on street corners, disappeared for days at a time, was picked up by police on suspicion of luring children for purposes of pedophilia (later discounted, according to the NSSS background) . . . the catalogue of disturbing behaviour goes on for five pages.

So why wasn't he committed? According to Herschel Hardin, president of the NSSS, the mental health system is guilty of misinterpreting and misunderstanding the very legislation that governs it.

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