

NuLAP a Vital Service for Nunavut Lawyers

John MacLean talks vicarious trauma and the pressures of the legal profession

By Carolyn Curtis

Lawyers have the highest rate of mental illness of any profession and among the highest rates of depression and substance abuse, says John MacLean. The past president of the Nunavut Branch of the Canadian Bar Association, he is now the executive director of the Nunavut Lawyers Assistance Program, which provides counselling and peer support to members of the legal profession and their families.

MacLean knows firsthand the benefits of the program and made mental health in the legal profession a priority in his role as president of the bar association.

“I make no bones about it,” he says. “I’m not just a fan of the program. I’m a card carrying member.”

MacLean started out in journalism, studying at the University of King’s College in Halifax. His interest in politics, government and decision-making lead him to the legal profession. There, he found a “work hard, play hard” culture that embraced alcohol and other substances as a way to relieve the stress of the job.

“[The law profession] is also where you find Type A personalities,” he explains. “We think we can fix everything and we think it’s a sign of weakness to ask for help.”

“It makes us wonderful advocate for our clients... but it does not necessarily do any good when we’re facing a crisis ourselves.”

For lawyers in Nunavut, the practice of law brings its own particular challenges. Often there is extensive travel involved in and out of communities, which can mean frequent time away from family and friends. Particularly with the many young lawyers moving to the territory, familiarizing themselves with a new situation, away from their usual supports, can be difficult.

“We get a lot of young lawyers here,” MacLean explains. “Moving to a new place and new job and new lexicon can be a pretty stressful thing, especially if you are away from your family and supports.”

With most lawyers in Nunavut practicing criminal law, there are often cases of vicarious trauma as well.



“We have a lot of external pressure on us,” says MacLean. “If you are a trial lawyer... they are representing people going through some of the worst times of their life.”

MacLean emphasizes that if law practitioners don’t address mental health issues, the results can be devastating, from disciplinary actions to even suicide.

“You can find yourself losing everything,” he says.

MacLean, who has experienced depression since he was a teenager, has benefited greatly from the NuLAP program. Combined with daily physical exercise and other coping skills, it has had a dramatic impact on his mental health and ability to handle the stress of the job. Keeping in touch with family and friends over Skype and taking much-needed vacations are also key to establishing a better work-life balance.

The NuLAP program is made possible with the support of the Alberta Lawyers’ Assistance Society. In a serious crisis, Nunavut lawyers can call the number on the back of their law society card and are connected with a 24-hour hotline out of Alberta.

NuLAP provides 2 hours of counselling to everyone in the law profession within Nunavut. After that, they are able to connect lawyers with other resources, including peer support and mentorship.

“People don’t necessarily want to talk to a psychologist,” says MacLean, explaining that for some lawyers, just going for coffee with someone who can understand where they are coming from can be extremely helpful.

NuLAP is operated on a shoestring budget, costing only \$1500 a year, thanks to the support from Alberta and local volunteers.

“It’s a very small amount of money for a really vital service for all lawyers whether you’re a member of the CBA or not,” MacLean says.

As the program’s director, he would like to branch out to reach more legal practitioners throughout the territory.

MacLean is also looking at holding a collaborative vicarious trauma workshop with mental health workers and nurses, who face many of the same stressors in their professions.

A long term goal is to establish an alternative route for lawyers facing disbarment due to mental health issues.



NuLAP provides counseling and other support to Nunavut-resident lawyers, articling students, law students, judges and their families who have personal problems. NuLAP is funded by the Nunavut Branch of the Canadian Bar Association.

Since January 1, 2013, counseling and peer support services are free and provided by

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