An unashamed conversation

“What mental health needs is more sunlight, more candor, and more unashamed conversation.” - Glenn Close, 2010

I could be writing about keeping both the mind and body healthy. There are decades of research showing that mental illnesses cause physical symptoms; that maintaining mental clarity and decreasing stress reduces the effects of physical illness; and that it is imperative that we de-stigmatize and normalize mental health issues, much as we would cardiac disease, arthritis, or any other medical condition. We all know someone who has been touched by the invisible hand of mental illness.

I could talk about how everyone is human—that it is okay to make mistakes, to take a step back and breathe; we have all had periods of sadness, anxiety, and hopelessness. I could assert that we must forgive ourselves for bad days, forgive others for the same, communicate hardships and shortcomings, and empathise with one another.

But I write this editorial in June 2020, the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. All of our systems are being tested like never before, and the cracks in our society are showing. Here in London, Ontario, as a medical student, I live in a world that consists mostly of my room and occasional glimpses of others through video calls. Keeping up with current events seems impossible, and every month seems to uncover a new set of issues, both local and international. The world is lonely, the world is frustrated, and the world is angry. Focusing on myself seems like the last thing on my mind.

However, it brings me hope that every week I receive a text from a friend, checking in and making sure I am okay. I see people picking up new hobbies, stepping back from overwork, and spending time with loved ones. I see recognition that we are all stuck in the same boat, that this is a stressful time which could exacerbate mental issues, and that we need to keep each other sane. I see kindness and empathy and communication. And although I recognize that this might not be everyone’s experience, I find that it is more than was done before.

The articles in this issue of the UWOMJ were all written before the pandemic started, but they are just as relevant now, if not more. They address some of the biopsychosocial aspects of mental health, such as comorbid mental and physical illness (Ruicci et al). They discuss how physicians experience mental health stressors and burnout (Gray, Quint et al, Dhar et al). Finally, they investigate alternative methods of addressing mental illness, ranging from new technology (Veettil et al, Wang et al) to urban planning and systematic changes (Yu et al, Wiederman et al).

I ask that as you read the articles in this issue, reflect on your experiences both before and during these trying times. See what could have been done previous and what can be done now. And I hope that after all this is done, we continue to check in, speak up, and maintain the mental health of everyone around us.

Jordan Ho
Senior Associate Editor, June 2020

REFERENCES