

Chamber lauds mental health spending

Businesses save money in long run

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CALGARY HERALD

Calgary and Canadian businesses are waking up to the huge cost of neglected mental health problems, participants of a Calgary Chamber of Commerce lunch heard Tuesday.

The chamber was doing its bit to fight the stigma of mental illness by hosting a panel discussion on the problems faced in the workplace by people suffering manic depression, paranoia, clinical depression and schizophrenia.

"The message we are hearing is that there is a lot of value in businesses being aware of the impact of mental health," said chamber president-elect Barry Rempel. "There are a lot of people who are valuable employees who do have problems but who can continue to contribute if we help them."

Too often small businesses don't

have the resources to turn to and that is where the chamber can help, Rempel said.

Business has not looked at the cost of having to replace long-serving employees who have mental health problems, he said. "If we can keep them healthy and bring them along, when we have invested sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars in training, it just makes good business sense," he said.

Rempel estimated the cost of mental illness to business worldwide is \$120 billion and in Canada about \$8 billion, a figure which he said are likely low.

Wendy Dixon, of Brainstorm, a Cal-

gary consulting company that focuses on mental health issues, said mental health problems are now almost in vogue because of the great business leadership in Calgary.

The city of Calgary, Calgary Chamber of Commerce and the Alberta Mental Health Board are sponsoring the first conference of its kind in Canada next week on the impact of mental illness in the office and on the shop floor. And General Motors Canada president Maureen Kempston Darkes is a keynote speaker on how companies can balance stress at work and outside. "We are thrilled because

if we can get this out of the hands of health and look at it from an economic point of view it will be like a breath of fresh air," Dixon said.

Psychiatric disability accounts for five of the leading 10 causes of all disability, and depression constitutes 14 per cent of all disability in Canada, she said.

One of the speakers, Bev Stevenson, an emergency room nurse at the Peter Lougheed Centre, said conditions at her workplace have improved greatly. The employee assistance program is now confidential so people at work don't have to know why you are off sick, she said.