

Should universities inform parents when their children have mental-health issues?

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The transition from high school to university or college is one of the most stressful times in a young person's life.

The late teens, early 20s are also the time in life when severe mental illness often reveals itself and when earlier mental-health issues – eating disorders, anxiety, depression and the like – can be exacerbated.



Suicide is a leading cause of death in this age group, second only to motor-vehicle crashes.

“Every parent should know that this can happen to any family. We're living proof of this,” says Eric Windeler, founder and executive director of Jack.org, which promotes mental-health advocacy by young people.

Jack Windeler died by suicide in March, 2010, while he was a student at Queen's University. His parents had no idea he had stopped attending class, withdrawn socially and was depressed.

“Parents are often the last to know,” Mr. Windeler says.

He was thinking about this sad reality again on the weekend when he read a New York Times story about [Graham Burton](#), a Canadian student at Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., who died by suicide in his dorm room in December, 2016.

The tragic deaths, six years apart, raise many questions, among them: “What can be done to address the epidemic of suicide in young people?” and “Do universities and colleges have an obligation to tell parents when their children are struggling with mental-health issues?”

Mr. Burton's parents, Gina and Stewart, were angered to learn that their son's struggles were well known among faculty and staff at the college and that no one notified them.

They published an [open letter](#) stating their concerns “to ensure that no other family has to endure what we have experienced.”

They are also leading a push to have privacy laws loosened up so parents can get children the help they need.

This is a crucial issue, but not a simple one.

College and university students are adults. They have a right to privacy. Parents are not entitled to see their children's medical records any more than they are entitled to see their transcripts. In the era of helicopter parenting, schools often fight these battles constantly.

In most cases, parents and their children work out these issues; most share gladly.

But when students suffer from mental-health problems, they are often embarrassed or scared and don't want their parents to be worried. So, they hide their problems and try to deal with them themselves.

In cases of severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia, sufferers can be unaware they are even sick, a condition known as anosognosia. But, if they are competent, they can refuse help.

When students exhibit concerning behaviour – such as they stop going to class, stop bathing, withdraw socially, engage in self-harm, start talking about suicide and so forth – alarm bells should go off, ideally triggered by professors, dormitory assistants and counsellors. And parents feel they have a right to know.

“The health and safety of young people trump privacy,” Mr. Windeler says.

Currently, the law allows for privacy to be breached – read: contacting parents or guardians – only if a student poses an imminent danger to themselves or others.

But there are approaches that can be taken other than legislative change.

To begin with, universities and colleges need clear policies on when and how they can intervene.

Many schools allow parents and students to sign contracts that allow sharing of health information. These are used commonly with students with pre-existing health conditions, such as a young person who has suffered from depression for years before starting university.

But in many cases, students only develop mental-health problems once they are away at school – with both Jack Windeler and Graham Burton serving as examples.

Mr. Windeler has never blamed anyone for his son Jack's death; unlike Mr. Burton's case, the school was unaware he was sick.

However, in recent years, awareness has soared. Students are far more willing to seek help, but the help is not always there. The wait for counselling and psychological care is months long at many campuses.

Jack.org is based on the premise that young people can help young people. They promote mental-health first-aid and peer support. For example, a roommate or dormitory assistant could contact parents if they are concerned about a student.

“There are so many of these stories that end with: ‘If only we had known,’” Mr. Windeler says.

“We have to give young people and families a fighting chance.”