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HAMILTON REGION

McMaster Children's Hospital reports rise in 'more serious' suicide attempts

By **Kate McCullough** Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

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A medical director at McMaster Children's Hospital says his team is "trying to understand" the reasons behind a [sharp increase](#) in youth requiring "significant" medical intervention following a suicide attempt.

"This is an anomaly," said Dr. Olabode Akintan, director of the inpatient program and mental-health emergency services at the hospital, and also an assistant professor in McMaster University's psychiatry department.

In the four-month period from October to January, there were 26 youth admissions to hospital for medical intervention and stabilization following a suicide attempt — [more than three times](#) the seven recorded in the same span last year.

"It's a significant increase, but I think that the nuance is in the detail," Akintan said. "Overall, there aren't more people presenting in the hospital, but ... we have more people with more serious suicide attempts."

Akintan said the number of patients in this category tends "to trend within a certain range," seven in a four-month period being typical.

"Twenty-six is an outlier," he said of the recent surge. "I think we all recognize that it was an outlier."

The majority of patients — most high-schoolers aged 15 to 17 — are from Hamilton, Brantford Haldimand, Norfolk and Burlington, but some come from outside of those regions.

From April 2020 to September 2020, Hamilton Health Sciences reported "no appreciable difference" from the previous year.

Akintan said in the first few months of the [pandemic](#) "everybody hunkered down," just trying to get by.

"People were scared to go to the hospital, people were scared to go to their clinics. Many clinics were closed," he said. "Then, as things started to ease and people's capacities started to wane, we saw folks returning back to getting their care."

He said for some, particularly youth who struggle with anxiety or bullying, a short period of isolation may have been "protective."

"But the extent of it and the duration of it has made it almost counterproductive," he said. "People are now wanting to have some kind of social engagement."

School [closures](#) and a series of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders over the last year has caused isolation, which [some argue](#) has disproportionately affected kids.

Without a detailed study, reasons for the surge — lack of social interaction, increased conflict at home and the absence of structure and routine — are "basically speculation," Akintan said.

Anecdotally, families are reporting "worsening symptoms" among children — symptoms exacerbated by the pandemic's isolation.

"One can only imagine that would have an impact," he said.

But even before the pandemic, suicide ideation among Ontario students was at an all-time high.

A Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) [survey](#) of more than 14,000 Ontario youth in Grade 7 to Grade 12 found that one in six students reported having “serious thoughts” about suicide in the year preceding the survey – the highest on record.

Akintan said they “are feeling that things aren’t going well in the in the community,” but it’s unclear whether this trend will continue.

“The long-term impact is yet to be fully appreciated,” he said.

Where to get help

If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide, help is out there. In case of an emergency, call 911 for help.

Distress and Crisis Ontario: dcontario.org

ConnexOntario: 1-866-531-2600

Good2Talk (post-secondary): 1-866-925-5454 or text GOOD2TALKON to 686868



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