

Living with schizophrenia

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Seventeen years after being diagnosed with schizophrenia, Austin Mardon hasn't let the disease control his life. The Order of Canada recipient is a strong advocate for patients taking medications on time and is touting the success of Risperdal Consta. Submitted photo

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There are approximately 30,000 Albertans living with schizophrenia, including many right here in Central Alberta.

Schizophrenia can be managed in most cases with appropriate and regular treatment – but, according to some figures, as many as 60% of patients don't take their medication as prescribed.

But one medication, and new coverage from the province, is offering new hope.

Recently listed on the drug benefit list for the province's supplementary health plans, Risperdal Consta, a long-acting medication that is administered every two weeks, is offering patients not only an alternative to daily oral medication but ongoing interaction with healthcare professionals.

And it is offering a new lease on life for those living with schizophrenia, like Austin Mardon, whose life changed forever 17 years ago.

After taking part in a two-month NASA scientific expedition in search of meteorites in the Antarctic, Mardon suffered severe frostbite and nerve damage serious enough that doctors warned him he could lose his leg.

And then, after life threw high-stress situations his way - including being questioned by Soviet agents - something in his mind "simply snapped" and a promising academic career came crashing to a halt.

That was 17 years ago, when Mardon was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

"I just cracked," said Mardon, who has authored dozens of scientific books and papers and had a personal audience with Pope John Paul II. "Life changed to being inside my head. I didn't know what to do."

Schizophrenia can produce delusions and powerful hallucinations along with symptoms like severe depression, lack of motivation and apathy to such an extent that the simplest of tasks and the energy they require are almost too much to bear.

Mardon switched from one medication to another, sometimes in different combinations, and the belief that his life was over began to weigh heavily on his shoulders.

"A major problem with schizophrenia is people forget to take their medication the way they should and missing a dose disrupts the ability to cope."

But Mardon didn't lay down and die. Instead, he began volunteering, working with various organizations like the Schizophrenia Society of Alberta, Unsung Heroes and with the premier's council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

For his work to help others struggling with mental illness, Mardon has received numerous awards and citations, including the Order of Canada in 2007 and was inducted into the International Academy of Astronautics.

"I would have preferred I hadn't developed the disorder but because of my disability I've helped a lot of people," said Mardon from his home in Edmonton. "You can still have a life."

"Since I've been on Consta, it has given me what I would call an awakening. I know for sure getting the medication has made a difference. I sleep less, I have more energy and because it is sustained release, there aren't the ups and downs that come with other medications. It has made a difference."

"Schizophrenia can be a difficult illness to live with, and remembering daily medication is just one more complication," said Dr. Toba Oluboka, director of the Calgary Central Mental Health Clinic and Assertive Community Treatment Team. "There is a risk of relapse when medication is taken irregularly. Compared with traditional treatments, long-acting therapies maintain medication levels in the body and may help avoid this problem."

"With patients that I have spoken with who are on Consta have seen a change in their lives and that is positive."

"There have been many positive outcomes with this treatment."

Both Mardon and Oluboka have hopes that treatment options like Consta will lead to greater freedom for more people living with schizophrenia.

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