

## Fighting the stigma of mental illness



On the occasion of AMI-Quebec's 15th anniversary, Monty Berger (right) presents Dr. Edward Levinson with a certificate acknowledging the many years of support by the Institute of Community and Family Psychiatry.

When an individual is diagnosed as mentally ill, family members often are plunged into crisis. While most of their energies are focussed on trying to help the person who is ill, they also are overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, frustration, anxiety. And the grief remains a private burden as they try to carry on completely isolated from others in similar situations.

AMI-Quebec Alliance for the Mentally Ill is determined to break through this isolation, and at the same time, to educate the public about mental illness. Executive Director Ella Amir explains that the organization's primary *raison d'être* is to provide unconditional support, acceptance and information to families and friends of the mentally ill. "We let them know that they are not alone and that they are not to blame for the illness," says Ms. Amir.

This latter point is particularly important because for many years, the family unit, and more specifically the mother, were blamed for causing the problem. In fact, mental illness, a chemical imbalance in the brain, is a "no-fault disease". While many aspects of the disease remain unclear, scientists believe it is caused by a genetic predisposition to mental illness triggered by environmental stress. These stressors can include the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, and drug abuse, to name a few.

Because mental illness can come on quite suddenly, families are often not prepared to cope with the illness and its repercussions. In other cases, although there are signs that perhaps something is wrong, family members deny or ignore the symptoms, hoping they will somehow disappear. "The process of acceptance can take years," according to Ms. Amir.

AMI-Quebec offers a range of services including a library of books, pamphlets and videos, monthly lectures given by professionals who work with the mentally ill, and two monthly support groups, one conducted in the evening and the other in the daytime. Each support group has a mix of newcomers and "old-timers" who share knowledge and coping strategies gleaned from years of experience. Psychiatric social workers attend the meetings to provide valuable information about appropriate community resources as well as a professional viewpoint.

The seeds of AMI-Quebec were planted 15 years ago by four couples who decided to meet on a regular

basis to help each other cope. Ms. Amir points out that from day one, the group received permission to hold its monthly meetings in the JGH Institute of Community and Family Psychiatry's auditorium. This marked the beginning of a productive relationship with the hospital, which continues to this day. "We are very grateful to the Jewish General for its generosity," says Ms. Amir.

This sentiment is echoed by President of AMI-Quebec Monty Berger, who recalls the encouragement and support provided by Dr. Henry Kravitz, emeritus chief of the JGH Department of Psychiatry, Dr. Philip Beck, chief, and Dr. Edward Levinson.

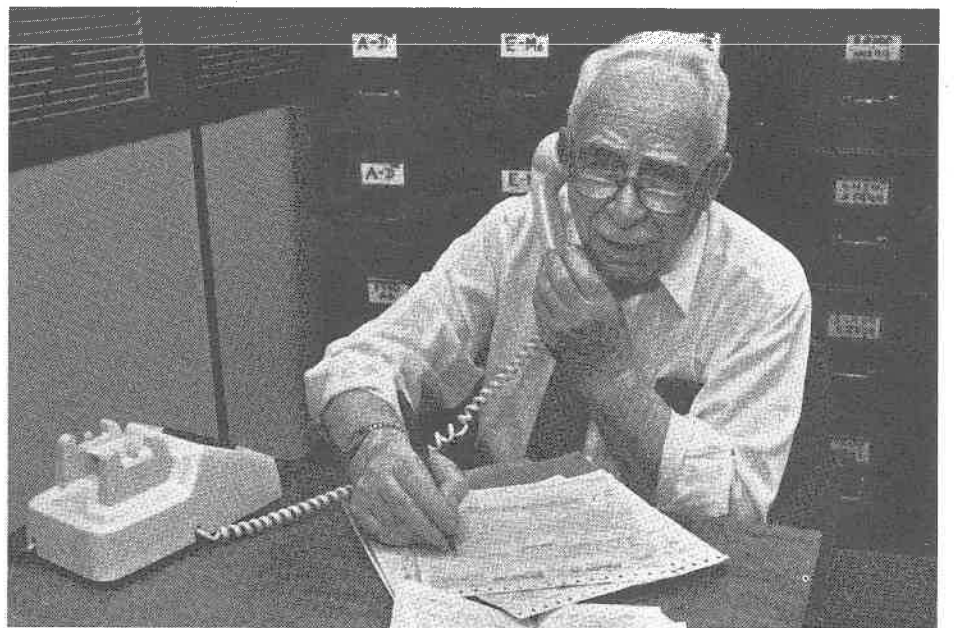
With the help of a provincial grant received two years ago, AMI-Quebec has expanded its services and now is working to increase public awareness of mental illness. Ideally, the organization would like to develop an educational program for high schools, colleges and universities. "It's very important to fight ignorance and reduce the stigma of mental illness," explains Ms. Amir.

Given that mental illness affects approximately 15% of the population, this stigma is a major problem. Mr. Berger decries society's neglect of the mentally ill and their families, calling this lack of attention a scandal. "Mental illness can destroy a whole family's productivity. The damage is immense."

On Tuesday, May 5, AMI-Quebec will be holding an intensive one day seminar entitled "Mental Illness; Family Care Givers in the Treatment Team". The focus will be on the relationships between families and mental health professionals.

For further information about the seminar, which is open to the public, call AMI-Quebec at 486-1448.

## Volunteer says helping out keeps him young



On any given weekday, if you take a trip to the Purchasing Department, chances are you'll find 85 year old volunteer Louis Rabinovitch hard at work.

Three to four days per week, Mr. Rabinovitch assists the department by phoning local suppliers to give medical and pharmaceutical orders. It's a job that comes naturally to Mr. Rabinovitch, who had spent many years working in the purchasing field.

There is, however, an important difference between working for a living and volunteering. "Here, I haven't got the pressure of working for pay. I get enjoyment without aggravation," Mr. Rabinovitch explains.

His day begins at 8:00 a.m. and he finishes at 2:30 p.m., often working straight through lunch. He takes his work seriously and admits, "My mind is always occupied, even when I come home, and I'll make a note to check up on things the next day."

Upon his retirement at age 65, Mr. Rabinovitch and his wife spent time relaxing and travelling. Then, as he puts it, "After two years, I figured, it's enough." Thus, he began volunteering three days per week at the JGH. When his wife died, he felt a need to volunteer five days per week.

When asked what he gains from volunteering, Mr. Rabinovitch replied, "Everything. It's the best thing for me, and it keeps me young." Although his decision to volunteer came out of a natural inclination to help, he recognizes that volunteering brings its own rewards. For instance, he derives satisfaction from a job well done, and knows his efforts make a

difference.

Mr. Rabinovitch particularly enjoys the sense of camaraderie, respect and devotion which he receives from his fellow employees in the Purchasing Department. "I'm treated like an equal, and we're all a family here. I'm invited to their weddings and celebrations," he says. In fact, members of the department joke that since he has become a fixture in their office, they cannot afford to let him retire.

For his part, Mr. Rabinovitch expresses no desire to "retire". Insisting that one is never too old to volunteer, he concludes, "I'm very happy here, and I'll continue to volunteer as long as I can." □

## Holiday cheer

The Committee for the Retention of Nurses (ReNu) hosted a holiday season cheer on December 25, 1991. To show their appreciation to nurses for their hard work and caring, committee representatives delivered eggnog, juice and cookies to nursing staff on all units.



Left to right: Alison Milligan, former ReNu co-chair, Paula Rozanski and Adele Ferrante, co-chairs, Martine Fortin, head nurse 8W.

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