

Stopping cyberbullying requires a combined societal effort

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The Internet and social media have transformed the nature of bullying. Cyberbullying has become a pervasive threat to the health and well-being — and sometimes the lives — of youth. The federal government has proposed new legislation to combat cyberbullying,¹ which it hopes to pass by spring of this year. Although the Criminal Code covers many activities that constitute serious forms of bullying, the new law would add specific prohibition of the transmission of “intimate images” of an individual without his or her consent. It would also empower the courts to seize electronic devices used to commit alleged cyberbullying offences.

This welcome new legislation will complement provincial initiatives to improve the ability of law enforcement to address the most serious forms of cyberbullying. But making meaningful progress against the rising incidence of this problem will not occur through laws alone — it will require a concerted effort across all sectors of society.

Cyberbullying most commonly takes the form of threatening or aggressive messages or hateful comments transmitted via emails, text messages or social media websites.² It can also involve the assumption of another’s online identity or the dissemination of personal information or intimate images. Traditional bullying may be confined to the schoolyard, but cyberbullying can follow its victims wherever they go, at any time of day. The mass upscaling of social connectivity facilitated by the Internet can lend cyberbullying a similar increase in the scale of its participation and impact: taunts, threats, embarrassing personal information and intimate images can now easily be spread instantly, globally and permanently. And cyberbullying may be crueller because it is performed with a menacing anonymity not mitigated by empathy that might otherwise be evoked when bullies have to look their victims in the face.

Cyberbullying is by no means exclusive to youth, but most of its victims and perpetrators are teens and young adults. Recent Canadian data indicate that 1 in 3 high school students have been victims of some form of bullying, and just under 1 in 10 have reported experiencing cyberbullying.³ Some surveys in other countries have reported a much higher incidence.³ For both victims and perpetrators, cyberbullying has been associated with depression, low self-esteem, behavioural problems and substance abuse, problems that often persist into adulthood.⁴ Cyberbullying is also associated with an increased risk of suicide, perhaps more so for girls,⁴ which has drawn particular public attention to the problem through tragic high-profile cases such as those involving Canadian teens Rehtaeh Parsons and Amanda Todd.

Just as bullying has changed, the strategies we use to combat it must evolve. The law is one important example. The federal government’s proposed legislation covers much more than cyberbullying. Some have accused the government of reintroducing anti-privacy measures from a previous bill that it abandoned in the

face of substantial public protest.⁵ Such concerns are important, but we must not lose an opportunity to curtail cyberbullying.

Regardless, new criminal and civil laws alone will not suffice to deal with less severe but much more common forms of cyberbullying and their impact on the well-being of youth. Health professionals, in whom youth may be more willing to confide than in teachers or parents, have an important role to play in identifying whether cyberbullying is occurring. Onset of new behavioural or mental health problems, psychosomatic symptoms or a decline in school performance should prompt questioning about bullying, including cyberbullying. Once identified, the clinician should screen for the associated sequelae of cyberbullying, including depression and suicidality, and bring in appropriate resources to address both the bullying and its consequences.

Schools must continue to play a primary active role against all forms of bullying, through education, prevention, monitoring and enforcement. New antibullying legislation brought forward in Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec has focused on strengthening the roles and responsibilities of schools. Parents must also be vigilant about the online and social activities of their children and be quick to identify and address changes in behaviour arising from those activities. Internet and social media companies, whose platforms enable cyberbullying, must play a more active role in stopping it. And the media must be cautious and responsible in its coverage of suicides linked to cyberbullying, given concerns about suicide “contagion.”

Whatever form it takes, bullying is unhealthy for victims, perpetrators and society. Modernizing our laws to incorporate cyberbullying explicitly is a positive step to improve health and one that the medical profession should support.

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