

The woman who desperately needed help

Attention, attention must finally be paid to the sad, heart-wrenching case of Margo G.

Margo, who lived in North Vancouver, committed suicide early this year at the age of 69, in a welter of paranoid delusions. It was yet another death that could, and should, have been avoided.

We owe it to all those suffering from severe mental illness to pay attention to how it happened, and to not just forget events and forget Margo, as if they were of little consequence – as if her illness and suicide were just par for the course and deserving of nothing more than consignment to a filing cabinet.

Margo was a retired school teacher, with 34 years of teaching experience behind her, mostly in Vancouver. She grew up in South Vancouver and went to Magee Secondary in Kerrisdale, then on to UBC where she took her teacher training.

In 2000, however, now in her fifties, she began to suffer from paranoid delusions, which gradually grew more intense and elaborate.

She briefly went to hospital at one stage, but was prematurely discharged. Her paranoia only increased.

More recently, she suffered from a prolapsed uterus, which became painful and impeded walking, but she wouldn't see a doctor about it, because surgery would require a general anesthetic. She wasn't going to allow that to happen because she knew, in her paranoia, that when she went under, the surgeons would insert additional chips in her brain.

In the summer of 2014, she began circulating a 7,500-word essay detailing the evil forces arrayed against her and threatening the world.

At one point, she had written to Stephen Harper, Peter McKay and Vic Toews in the federal government about what was happening to her and the "Weapons." She also, at different times, wrote long letters to the RCMP, and local politicians documenting the

way she was being tortured and tormented.

Wherever she went, she dragged behind her a cart carrying a box with all her files documenting her allegations. She wouldn't leave it at home or unattended in her car because, out of her sight, it might be stolen or tampered with.

A neighbour in the building where she lived noticed Margo, initially friendly, was becoming increasingly suspicious and hostile, eventually accusing the neighbour of being part of the network spying on her.

Staff and members at a seniors centre in North Vancouver, which Margo frequented, noticed how weird her behaviour was becoming. Soon, one of the staff would try to get her help.

Margo's paranoia, it seemed, was running out of control.

Spies, sabotage, radiation all part of her delusions

To get a sense of how established her illness was, and how very much the signs were on the surface, it's worth considering her own account of the forces working against her.

It all began with loud bangs on the roofs and walls of her house, when she was sleeping. She later realized the bangs were caused by weapons of mass destruction that create noises like bowling balls colliding, or sawing and hammering, to make you think they are real when actually they are not.

Then another problem: Her body would jerk and even lift her off the bed. Later she was attacked with zaps, so escaped in her car to get some sleep, but had a huge military plane all lit up flying right over her head.

Subsequently, in the North Vancouver condo to which she had moved, she was spied on by what she called "heel-snappers" who, in a difficult mission, were able to always be on hand at exactly the right time when she was entering or leaving the building.

The "picture surveillance" of the condo could see everything she did 24/7, including going to the washroom.

"Familiar faces" at the library made the printer there distort her print-outs.

Radio static in underground parking lots she interpreted as evidence of possible spy activity.

Her safety deposit boxes were tampered with, her phones and emails monitored, computer sabotaged, fax machine tampered with, radios zapped and broken by "the torturers," her car surreptitiously driven by others, her home the subject of massive doses of radiation (the crows, being smart birds, would no longer go into the cedars by her balcony because of the radiation).

She filled her bed with "hundreds" of magnets and also bought "massive amounts" of aluminum, steel and other metals to try and stop the satellite rays from zapping her. (Ultimately she would have two layers of bricks under her bed to stop the radiation coming up from below.)

This and more is all covered in just the first part of her account. The rest is even more elaborate and frightening – neo-Nazi lethal weapons from satellites, with the RCMP implicated, that kill people in a few seconds or, alternatively, can cause cancer anywhere they wish.

Torture involved teeth removal and hand attacks. "The satellite on my right hand never quits," she wrote. The torturers removed gold crowns and four other teeth, and were attacking others.

People were turned into robots which could be controlled and manipulated by the satellite neo-Nazi forces and, with the robots defenceless, have their body parts attacked. This, she explained, is how her uterus was pulled down to the opening of her vagina and had become very painful.

She complained of having to sell five homes in order to keep on moving and "counteract the satellite weapons targeted at me."

The account went on for several thousand more words, growing ever more fantastical and extraordinary.

“The contents of this letter must get out to all people,” she ended, “...RIGHT NOW, TO SAVE US AND OUR CHILDREN IN THE FUTURE.” It didn’t occur to her this would make it virtually impossible to keep the letter out of the hands of the RCMP and their helpers, with which instruction, also in capital letters, her letter began.

It’s almost impossible not to think fondly of Margo, because of the spirit and determination with which she sought to vanquish the threats she saw everywhere..

When she was briefly in Lions Gate Hospital, she deduced that as long as she maintained there were planes flying overhead to harass and spy on her, she wouldn’t be discharged. So she told the nurse a “big fat lie,” that she had never seen any planes overhead, and was soon out the door. One up for citizen Margo and her inventiveness!

Yet she was severely ill and became even more so – in constant pain, unable to sleep more than two hours at a time, afraid to drive any distance, cutting herself off from many friends, suffering from a prolapsed uterus, having difficulty with her right hand, and plagued in all her waking hours by the menaces and conspiracies of the powers-that-be who were torturing and abusing her.

Because of her paranoia, she denied herself even having a dog or cat which, in her own words, she would have loved to have and which would have made her life special.

Urgent need for treatment went unacknowledged

We have gone into detail about her bizarre delusions, in this story, to underscore just how obvious her illness was.

However, when a staff member at the seniors centre began calling around to get help for Margo, she was repeatedly met with roadblocks. “There’s nothing we can do” was the stock response.

Only when she called NSSS’s Family Support Centre and subsequently talked to their support coordinator did she get understanding.

The support coordinator also faced difficulties in getting help for Margo, with the file being passed around from

one corner of Mental Health Services to another and back again.

At one point, a mental health worker suggested it would be “upsetting” to Margo to intrude on her – about as profound a misunderstanding of the need for treatment as one could imagine.

Despite the NSSS coordinator’s efforts over several months, and despite, also, her having forwarded a copy of Margo’s letter to Mental Health Services, nothing apparently was done.

Finally, because of a report of increasing agitation and an implied threat, the police decided to apprehend her for a psychiatric assessment.

Unfortunately, when they located her, in her car, she accelerated and sped off. A short high-speed chase ensued until police suspended it for safety reasons. “I got away,” she told a friend.

She was apprehended the next day in Vancouver and returned to the RCMP in North Vancouver. They concluded that, rather than taking her to Lions Gate Hospital, they would hold her in custody and recommend charges (dangerous operation of a motor vehicle, flight from a police officer).

There was concern that the hospital might just release her in a few hours whereas in the forensic system she would be kept in hand and hopefully get the help she needed.

She was apparently certified in remand and then sent to the Forensic Hospital at Colony Farm in Coquitlam, but in a couple of weeks was discharged. Then, after a court appearance, she was released from custody awaiting trial.

So there was Margo, still very delusional, back in her condo again without any treatment.

Two other routine court appearances followed, as the wheels of justice ground slowly on. The demands of the system now reinforced her delusions of persecution. In mid-January, a month and a half after she was first detained, she threw herself out of a fifth-story window in her condo building.

A coroner’s investigation is now underway, to look into the background details. The general problem, though, is fairly evident: a failure to acknowledge the urgency of the need for treatment and, at the same time, to face the reality of anosognosia, or lack of insight, in those with psychosis, and hence the need for involuntary admission.

If the North Shore had an urgent outreach program, for example, to go out to people profoundly psychotic like Margo, do an assessment, and write a first certificate, her devastating psychosis could have been looked after early on.

NSSS has been advocating for such a program for the better part of a decade.

We can’t gainsay the RCMP officers’ decision to charge Margo in order to get her into the forensic system. On occasion, even family members will insist on a charge being laid, in order to get their ill relative into the forensic system’s treatment stream, so frustrated are they with the inadequacies of general mental health services.

Those inadequacies are the root problem. The particular inaction of Mental Health Services on the North Shore in this case and Forensic Hospital’s premature discharge of Margo G. are no less disturbing.

Marijuana debate missing key factor

A key consideration is missing or understated in the great pot shop debate.

In April, when 64 people who participated in Vancouver’s annual “smoke-in” had to be taken to St. Paul’s Hospital, there was coverage galore.

There has similarly been much publicity about the City of Vancouver’s intention to begin licensing and regulating the mushrooming number of pot shops.

The easy access to getting a medical marijuana card, making a mockery of the very expression “medical marijuana,” has also been kept in the news.

What’s mostly missing in all the coverage and discussion, on the other hand, is the most troubling aspect of all: that marijuana is toxic to those with a serious mental illness or a predisposition to it.

It’s this particular harm of marijuana that should be front and forward in public discussion.

For a comprehensive analysis, please see the *Advocacy Bulletin’s* January 2013 and September 2013 issues at www.northshoreschizophrenia.org.