In homes across the country, children and teenagers are caring for sick and disabled family members.

BY ARGAIL CUKIER

B efore she leaves for college each day, 19-year-old Mary Laadiak, who is trying to change that, helps her mother feed her change and position her in the hospital bed set up in her living room after school. Mary, 19, who is studying to be a nurse, cleans the kitchen, vacuums the house and blends food for her mother. Tomorrow, she must remember to call the dietitian to make sure her mother is on the proper feeding schedule.

Mary remembers talking about "everything" with her mother, walking to the store and going to church. But as her multiple sclerosis has worsened, her mother is no longer able to offer words of advice, as she is unable to speak. She can't eat, walk on her own or go to the bathroom. She has been confined to a bed for four years.

"We lost a part of somebody. That person is not there anymore," Mary says. "Having her to go to the mall, do mother-daughter things. She used to iron and clean the house. It was spotless. I clean the house now."

Mary's father is her mother's primary caregiver, but because of his employment and their manage, it is Mary who communicates with her mother's medical team.

And Mary is trying to change that.

Barbara Carruthers, senior client care coordinator at the MS Alliance for Caregiving found that 1.3 million to 1.4 million families affected by cancer, mental illness and other serious conditions have at least one child. A 2005 study by the National Alliance for Caregiving found that 1.1 million children between the ages of 15 and 40, many sufferers have children who become caregivers as a result of their illness. The study found that 30 percent of caregivers are women, 45 percent of men.

A 2005 study by the National Alliance for Caregiving found that 1.3 million to 1.4 million children between the ages of 15 and 18 are caregivers in the United States. The study found that about 20 percent of caregivers are women, 45 percent of men.

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"I started thinking about all of the children we work with out there. As its children's issue coordinator, Ms. Baago and the Alzheimer's Society of Canada, found that up to 200,000 young caregivers, between the ages of 5 and 18, are caring for someone in the United States. The study found that about 20 percent of caregivers are women, 45 percent of men.

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Heather Chalmers, assistant professor in Child and Youth Studies at Brock University, is studying young caregivers for Young Carers Initiative Niagara.

She investigated resources for young caregivers in the Niagara Region, interviewed 14 caregivers, aged 14 to 26 and had 65 caregivers, aged 10 to 18, complete a survey.

Caregivers stressed the importance of seeking help from the community or friends, while many admitted to not having done so. They were afraid their family would be judged.

They felt they had missed out on being kids because they had to rush home to help. Many were bullied about their family member’s illness or their extra duties.

Many missed school or didn’t complete assignments because they were too tired. But they felt they were more mature and responsible than their peers and were prepped to go into the world and contribute with the skills they had gained.

Ms. Chalmers said organizations don’t have the funding or mandate to serve young people.

“Agencies might not even be aware or have the resources,” she said. “They need more funding or their mandates broadened.”

“To minimize harm and enhance the positive aspects, we need to help these youth. Let’s acknowledge them and support them. If we want successful, contributing members of society, let’s help these youth get there.”

**BC study**

Grant Charles, an assistant professor in the School of Social Work and Family Studies at the University of British Columbia is studying young caregivers in BC.

In a survey of high school students in Greater Vancouver, 58, or 12 per cent of the 483 students were caregivers, ranging in age from 12 to 17. Forty per cent were caring for a parent, 36 per cent for a grandparent and 32 per cent for another relative.

Caregivers did not report differences from their peers in self-esteem, stress levels or sleep patterns. They spent more time with family, while non-caregivers spent more time at work or playing sports.

“They may be more likely to have disagreements with their mothers,” Mr. Charles said. “This makes sense, as in crisis, you are more or likely to see your parents as intrusive. Parents are also going to be more assertive about getting help.”

In another study, Mr. Charles interviewed adults who had been young caregivers due to illness, family violence or parents who needed translators.

“The more disruptive the situation, the more harm it did as a young person,” Mr. Charles said. “If being treated as servants, there were more effects and more stress. They felt they were keeping the family together and no one cared much about them. Whereas the ones who said my parents loved me, these were just circumstances, were fairly happy, well-functioning adults.”

Many took on caregiving careers. They felt caregiving had made them good planners, resourceful and helped develop good judgement. Because they rushed home from school, they hadn’t developed deep friendships and were cautious of having someone dependent on them now.

“They were very happy to be telling their story,” Mr. Charles said. “Most didn’t even know there was this title to what they had done.”

**Tips for young caregivers**

- Allow child to phone home if worried about a relative
- Listen to child’s concerns without judging
- Help child find a counselor for support
- Parents not attending meetings
- Take advantage of agency resources:
  - Wellwood Juravinski House (www.wellwood.on.ca, 905-389-5884)
  - For people with cancer and their families. Online support for teens, peer mentoring, support groups and exercise programs
  - Hamilton VON (www.von.ca, 905-529-5000)
  - Respite care, caregiver educational seminars
  - Multiple Sclerosis Society (www.mssociety.ca/hamilton, 905-527-7874)
  - Counseling, kids camp program
  - ALS Society or Ontario (www.alsont.ca 289-313-0619)
  - Alzheimer Society of Canada (www.alzheimerhamiltonhalton.org, 905-529-7030)

- Canadian Mental Health Association (www.cmhahamilton.on.ca, 905-521-0090)
- Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, (www.heartandstroke.com, 905-574-4305)

- Regular absences
- Concentration problems
- Fatigue
- Late or incomplete homework
- Sudden drop in attendance or achievement
- Few friendships
- Very mature for age
- Unable to attend extracurricular activities
- Parents not attending meetings
- How to help
  - If possible, speak to parents
  - Help child find a counselor for support
  - Listen to child’s concerns without judging
  - Allow child to phone home if worried about a relative
  - Negotiate homework deadlines at difficult times
  - Just ask. Many young caregivers say if somebody had just asked, they would have accepted help.

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