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Ministry funds research on vulnerable populations

BY HEATHER CAMPBELL

Laurentian University's Centre for Rural and Northern Health Research (CRaNHR) has received funding of over \$3 million from the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's Health System Research Fund to undertake a number of important research projects focusing on vulnerable populations across Northern Ontario.

The funding is being directed towards several projects that focus on the transformation of health policy systems and practices to improve health equality. The research aims to improve access, delivery and quality of care across ages, genders, ethnicities and cultures with a focus on rural, remote, aboriginal and francophone populations.

"This funding allows us to respond to various community and provincial partners," said Dr. Wayne Warry, director of CRaNHR. "All of those become knowledge users and the results of our work are then passed along to them, or translated for various policy and programmatic purposes."

Warry was appointed director of CRaNHR in August 2012. He was previously chair of the Department of Anthropology at McMaster University.

Two of the projects are focused on culturally appropriate health care. The first, led by Kristen Jacklin, associate professor, Northern Ontario School of Medicine (NOSM), will address health policy and programs in aboriginal communities that involve three government funding partners. The second project, led by Dr. Nancy Young, Canadian research chair for rural and northern children's health, will address the development of culturally-relevant measures that can bring an evidence informed health-care model to aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal adults and seniors

The results from previous studies focusing on the experiences of aboriginal patients with the health-care system will be used to build a framework for cultural safety. The National Aboriginal Health Organization defines cultural safety as different from cultural sensitivity, that is, creating an environment that eliminates power imbalances and institutional discrimination found in a health-care setting.

"Our research is helping physicians to understand historical experience, the jurisdictional boundaries that aboriginal people face and the social determinants of health they face when applying treatment. It allows health-care providers to better understand traditional practices and to create a safe environment for interaction between the health-care system and aboriginal patients," said Jacklin.

Aboriginal children and youth

Young has an ongoing partnership with the Wikwemkong Unceded Indian Reserve and will continue working with the community to evaluate programs and services through the adaptation of the Aboriginal Children's Health and Well-being Measure (ACHWM).

"We started to develop a questionnaire from the perspective of kids and based on the medicine wheel," Young explains.

The questionnaire is delivered to children on a tablet with touch screen commands. What Young is more excited about with this technology is the sustainability of the data.

"One of the hurdles to collecting data has been who will collect. We don't want to collect paper data that has to be entered and then calculated. This will allow the research co-ordinator to download the data when they need to."

There are flags in the questionnaire that allow service providers to take immediate action if necessary.

"We would like to create something that works for one community and then fine-tune it for other communities.

The funding will provide the opportunity to work with three other communities.

Francophone communities

A third aspect of their research is to understand the availability of French language services and the access to and quality of care in rural francophone communities. Dr. Alain Gauthier, assistant professor, School of Human Kinetics, Laurentian University said, "We are looking at the number of physicians who can speak French and where they are choosing to set up their practice."

Telemedicine

Another aspect of the research will look at quality of care in relationship to telemedicine, but also training for community-based practitioners.

"The Ontario Telemedicine Network is interested in getting research to demonstrate the impact of telemedicine, particularly in rural and remote communities," said Warry. "We will be working closely with the OTN around issues of who uses telemedicine, for what purposes and what sites are heavily utilized and which ones are not."

Graduate students in the School of Rural and Northern Health's Interdisciplinary PhD program will be an integral part of the capacity building aspect of the research and will be trained in the theoretical foundations of health systems research in an interdisciplinary learning environment. ■

www.cranhr.ca