

Building Capacity in Applied Health Services Research

For health services research to really make a difference, it has to be used by the managers and policy-makers running the health system. But how do researchers learn to do work that will interest decision-makers? Equally important, how do they learn to communicate results with decision-makers?

The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation is addressing these questions through its Capacity for Applied and Developmental Research and Evaluation in Health Services and Nursing (CADRE) program. The program was set up in 1999 as a partnership between the foundation, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and several regional co-sponsors* in recognition of the need to improve the skills and increase the number of researchers doing work that is relevant to decision-makers.

One of the key components of the program is the training centres. There are four regional centres – one each in the west, Ontario, Quebec and the Atlantic provinces – and one national centre. All centres mentor and train researchers at the master's and doctoral levels, teaching them not only to do rigorous research but also to work closely with decision-makers. This is achieved in two ways: (1) with a curriculum that is tailored to applied research (which is the type of research decision-makers can use); (2) by having student researchers spend time at a decision-making organization to work on a project. Each training centre spans a number of universities and departments, which enables students to learn in an interdisciplinary environment. Furthermore, decision-makers are involved in all aspects of the students' training, from helping to design the curriculum to guiding students in their projects and disseminating the results.

Anna-Louise Pentland, the acting regional director of policy and intergovernmental relations in the BC and Yukon region for Health Canada, recently supervised Vicki Crites, a master's student from the Western Regional Training Centre, and is planning to bring in a second intern in the spring. Initially, she was most impressed by the strong partnerships the centre had formed – partnerships that ultimately benefited her organization.

"Our student organized a policy forum for more than 100 participants, and she was the key person who contacted and briefed the high-level panelists from UBC, Health Canada, the province and the regional health authorities," says Pentland. "She's created a stronger university and research link, helping to build bridges to create more opportunities for knowledge transfer."

Melissa Sullivan, a master's student at the Atlantic Regional Training Centre, recently did a placement at the College of Family Physicians of Canada. Sullivan is studying why fewer medical students are choosing family practice than in the past, so she applied to work on the college's national

physician survey. She says her supervisors at the college went out of their way to introduce her to other organizations.

"After being there for only a couple of weeks they invited me to sit in on a progress meeting between the research partners [the college, the Canadian Medical Association and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada], Health Canada and the Canadian Institute for Health Information. I was allowed to sit and listen and express any points I wanted to bring up," says Sullivan. "I was also invited to job-shadow at the CMA for a day, and I developed a lot of key contacts."

Inese Grava-Gubins, the director of research at the college, says Sullivan's work on the project also benefited her supervisors.

"It made us take a step back and explain how these data become policy, what the process is by which we present the data best. It was an interesting experience for me to explain that," she says.

Decision-makers also see the training centres as a step forward for the future of health services research.

"We were very interested in understanding that young people are being trained to do this kind of research," says Grava-Gubins. "When I came up there was nothing like that available. It was heartening to know someone's taking a proactive role in training people to do health services research."

Pentland agrees: "I think all organizations in the health arena are moving towards more evidence-based decision-making and having that knowledge transfer link, and this is a great vehicle to do that."

If you would like to become a decision-maker partner with one of the regional training centres, please contact Ellen Melis at ellen.melis@chsr.ca. For more information on the CADRE program, please visit the foundation's website at www.chsr.ca/cadre.

*The regional co-sponsors are the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care; the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority; Fonds de la recherche en santé du Québec; the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research; and the Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation.

Find out how to recruit, retain and combine talents with the best of them. **Join the HealthcareBoard.**
Free research, great media and mentoring from the best.

Contact Susan Hale at 416-864-9667 or shale@longwoods.com.

