



## **Completing the Picture: Collecting workplace exposure information from community health centres' patients**

There is no effective reporting or screening of occupational exposures in Ontario. There is no early warning system for work-related health conditions. There is minimally reliable or accessible information on the sources of occupational exposures, but these are environmental exposures, and we do not know what workers are exposed to.

However, a basic screening of occupational risks could help clinicians establish a diagnosis when there is information on a suspected occupational link or causation, and indicate appropriate treatment and management of the condition. It could initiate claims for compensation if there is a confirmed occupational exposure, and patient care would be covered by workers' compensation (rather than the Ministry of Health). Such information could also identify workplace hazards that may be eliminated or controlled, and initiate additional research to better understand diseases with multifactorial or obscure causes.

A multidisciplinary and collaborative project will be exploring the major logistical issues to setting up a wide-spread collection of current exposures from workers across the network of community health centres (CHCs) in Ontario. The study will examine the feasibility of establishing a basic screening of occupational risks and hazards, the logistical issues within a clinical setting to setting up the system, the facilitators and barriers to conducting the survey, and the possibility of adding these questions and answers to the patients' electronic medical charts.

Dr. Desre Kramer (Occupational Cancer Research Centre [OCRC]) and Dr. Linn Holness (Centre of Research Expertise in Occupational Disease [CREOD]), in partnership with researchers from Centre of Research Expertise for the Prevention of Musculoskeletal Disorders (CRE-MSD), and Laurentian University in Sudbury, have received funding from the Canadian Cancer Society Research Institute (CCSRI) and the Canadian Health Institutes for Research (CIHR) for this study. They are also working with the Public Safety Health and Safety Association (PSHSA) and the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW) who will help develop evidence summaries and communication products.

The study will be piloted in different CHCs that are geographically dispersed in Ontario. A basic exposure screening survey will be administered during the patient intake process. The questions will focus on present-day work exposures and risks such as fumes and dusts, combustion products, metals and solvents, other chemicals, air-borne particulates, and risks for musculoskeletal disorders.



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Community Health Centres have been selected because they are part of the public health care system, often represent the working population in a particular geographic area, have a goal of reaching vulnerable or uninsured patients, use a shared-care model so that tasks like history taking are distributed, and share a common electronic platform that supports learning across the CHCs.

We believe this study will help determine an effective way of collecting exposure hazard information. If it becomes a standard of care in the clinical setting, it could lay the groundwork for a surveillance system across the province and the country that would enable the targeting of prevention activities and policies and help determine future research into the health effects of particular exposures. It will 'Complete the Picture' of current patients' medical histories by adding much needed missing information.

### **About OCRC**

The Occupational Cancer Research Centre (OCRC) was established in 2009 as the first research unit in Canada solely dedicated to studying workplace cancer. Our goals are to identify cancer-causing agents in Ontario workplaces, increase awareness of the risk of workplace exposures, and identify the best means to control these and improve workers' health. The OCRC is based at Cancer Care Ontario (CCO), but is jointly funded by the Ministry of Labour and the Ontario Division of the Canadian Cancer Society, as well as CCO.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Dr. Desre Kramer at OCRC, 416-971-9800, ext 3341, or [desre.kramer@occupationalcancer.ca](mailto:desre.kramer@occupationalcancer.ca).