

**Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in  
Advance of the 2020 Budget**

**By: BC Women's Health Foundation**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation:** That the government provide funding in the amount of \$50 million in an initial capital investment, ongoing annual operating and research funding of \$25-40 million for the National Centre for Innovation + Excellence in Women's Health Research.

## National Centre for Innovation + Excellence in Women's Health Research

There is an urgent need for a National Centre for Innovation + Excellence in Women's Health Research and as a global leader in women's health research, Vancouver is the ideal location. The creation of a world-class research facility with data infrastructure, diverse research programs, a translational unit, interdisciplinary scientists, and sustainable funding mechanisms, will challenge the inequities faced by women in healthcare across Canada.

### WHY WOMEN'S HEALTH RESEARCH?

There are significant differences in how women and men experience health conditions: women have unique biological vulnerabilities to heart disease, chronic disease, reproductive and sexual health issues, and can experience cervical, ovarian and uterine cancers. Social determinants impact women more and intersect with physical health conditions. The science that informs medicine - prevention, diagnosis, and treatment - routinely fails to consider the impact of sex and gender.

Much of what we know about health and disease is based on male human and animal research. Historically, women were largely excluded from medical research; and even today some medications have only been tested on men, despite evidence that women react to them differently. Failing to consider sex and gender in health research effectively leaves women's health to chance.

Women's health research remains desperately underfunded. Nationally, only 1% of available awards have gone to women's health researchers<sup>1</sup>, and in BC, less than 8% of health grants were awarded to women's health researchers<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, female researchers, who are most likely to study women's health, are less likely to receive funding compared to their male counterparts.

Improvements in women's health research would have dramatic effects for the Canadian economy. Research commissioned by the BC Women's Health Foundation<sup>3</sup> (BCWHF) shows focusing on women's health could generate up to \$18 billion of annual savings related to worker productivity alone.

### WHY BRITISH COLUMBIA?

Over the last 13 years the Women's Health Research Institute (WHRI) has supported women's health research. The only pan-provincial research institute, it has over 270 members from post-secondary institutions and health authorities province-wide and leads the way on women's health research both nationally and globally.

BC has the only centralized data, diagnosis and screening bank in Canada as well as a diverse population, providing a living lab to test hypotheses. As a technology hub and home to the Digital Supercluster, BC provides a platform for cross-sectoral partnerships, creating solutions at a transformational pace.

BCWHF has been dedicated to facilitating strategic philanthropic investment in women's health research and equipment for over 23 years. They work to ensure that all women in BC have access to quality healthcare when, where and how they

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<sup>1</sup> C150, Canadian Research Chair, Canadian Excellence in Research Chairs and Brain Canada awards

<sup>2</sup> CIHR grants since 2008. Operating grants: 2008-2015, Project grants: 2016-2019, Foundation grants: 2016-2019.

<sup>3</sup> BC Women's Hospital + Health Foundation expanded its mandate May 2019, to advance the full spectrum of women's health province-wide as the BC Women's Health Foundation,.

need it, and are well placed to leverage existing relationships to secure additional funding sources to ensure the growth and sustainability of the Centre.

## THE SOLUTION

The National Centre for Innovation + Excellence in Women's Health Research will be a non-profit institute dedicated to advancing women's health in Canada and globally. The centre will focus on women's health from microscope to patient care, from health promotion to policy development, as well as the impact on mothers, daughters, partners, sisters, aunts, and friends across Canada.

To launch in 2022 with generous support from the Government of Canada, academic institutions and philanthropists, the centre will address the astounding inequities in healthcare through research capacity. It will create a network of women's health researchers across Canada, and lead women's health research globally through:

- Infrastructure
- Research
- People
- Training
- Capacity Building

Within five years, the centre will include approximately 500 associated research scientists, students, staff and others. Over twenty years, the intended impacts are far greater:

- Policies and practices adopting a gendered approach to healthcare;
- Sex-and-gender personalized healthcare directly stemming from science;
- Culturally-sensitive, trauma-informed and evidence-based women-centred care;
- Equitable funding across healthcare research;
- Exponential impacts on research with integrative and agile data infrastructure; and
- Personalized medicine approaches to ensure women receive the right treatment.

## Infrastructure

### *State-of-the-art facility*

This centre will unite multi-disciplinary scientists, clinicians, knowledge brokers, and policymakers in one space to reduce the burden of women's health issues. It will accommodate research across biomedical, clinical, population health and health service spheres, from undergraduate to research chair. It will capitalize on the existing network of over 270 WHRI members, the only centralized data and screening bank in Canada; and a diverse population.

### *Data hub*

The development of **centralized data infrastructure** for existing and new women's health research will support data collection, management, and analysis. It will enable partners involved in women's health to have a compounding impact with their research through an **electronic research data platform and secure IT infrastructure**.

### *Partnerships*

To accelerate the improvement of women's health the centre will partner with:

**Academia:** to support collaboration nationally. Engaging with all three Canadian women's health research institutes in Canada (the WHRI (Vancouver), the Women's College Research Institute (Toronto), the Women and Children's Health Research Institute (Edmonton)) and developing satellite sites in every province and territory. It will continue to nurture its strong relationship with UBC, and expand relationships with major universities from coast-to-coast-to-coast.

**Healthcare:** partnering with relevant healthcare organizations including the World Health Organization, other women's hospitals in Canada, and Public Health Agency of Canada etc.

**Government:** nationally, maintaining partnerships with the relevant ministries and offices including the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance, Department for Women and Gender Equality, Office of the Prime Minister, the Michael Smith Foundation or Health Research and other provincial health funding bodies, and CIHR.

**Industry:** building on cross-discipline relationships established by BCWH (including CDRD, Microsoft, Pacific Blue Cross, TELUS Health, Deloitte Health and LifeLabs).

**Communities:** incorporating geographic, social or cultural communities in research development, practice and dissemination to facilitate uptake of outputs; including Indigenous and new immigrant communities.

**Patients:** working with CIHR's Strategy for Patient-Oriented Research (SPOR) to ensure a robust patient engagement program.

**Public:** raising awareness of how women's health research can improve the wellbeing of women and girls, the wider society and our economy.

## Research

### *Cutting-edge*

Women's health research concentrates on the health of those that identify as women<sup>4</sup> from prevention to treatment, from DNA to societal impacts. Health research must be **responsive**, adapting to existing and future needs. Women have historically been misdiagnosed and mistreated due to a lack of understanding of their unique health needs. The centre will utilize a population health research stream to support the continual understanding and dissemination of the health needs and experiences of women, across all populations and all life stages.

### *Intersectional*

**Intersectionality** in health relates to the interrelating factors in people's lives including income, race, ethnicity, age, education that affect one's health and healthcare experiences. It is especially important for a nation with Indigenous populations, across urban, rural and remote regions that are disproportionately affected by health issues.

Similar to the best practices demonstrated at the WHRI in BC, the centre will promote tools and language in its programs and develop applications to embed intersectionality into practice and policy. This will ensure the research is **for women, by women, and with women**. The centre will also establish a central research stream related to women's health promotion to ensure the full spectrum of health and well-being is considered.

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<sup>4</sup> Research into the influence of sex and gender on health is vital. The Centre will focus on health of those who are either identified as female at birth, or those whose gender is woman. We adopt an inclusive definition of the term "women". Research relating to, gender-diverse people, sits within scope of the existing Institute of Gender and Health.

### *Bridge the evidence-to-practice gap*

It will establish original organizational structures, funding streams, and partnerships to leapfrog over entrenched systems. To ensure research is **meaningful in its application** the centre will develop knowledge translation strategies and roles. Health inequity for women and girls is a problem worldwide, global applications will be considered to ensure the research is applicable internationally as well as across Canada.

- **Associated research scientists**
- **Implementation Science**
- **Inter-disciplinary partnerships**
- **Training programs**
- **Personnel and resources**
- **Funding mechanisms**

## **People**

### *Attract and retain talent*

Vancouver provides the opportunity to build on the **established collection of leaders in women's health research**. They will have dramatic impact on the ability to attract additional talent and enable Canada to be at the forefront of women's health research.

### *Develop the next generation of researchers*

The field of women's health research needs to grow exponentially to reverse gender inequality in healthcare and improve the health of women in Canada. The centre will support growth with:

- **Early-career funding**
- **Mentoring**
- **Training opportunities**
- **Operational support**
- **Graduate program**
- **Innovative communication strategies**
- **Academic partnerships**

### *Create Canada's only women's health graduate program*

Currently, there are no women's health graduate programs in Canada<sup>5</sup>. This program will be targeted towards graduates who wish to incorporate women's health research into their careers. It will **introduce students to the field of women's health**, from basic research to implementation and knowledge translation. Students will pursue a **research project** and the program will offer maximum flexibility for healthcare professionals and trainees, including part-time options.

In addition to a full graduate program, the centre will also provide a **course on women's health in partnership with university affiliates** to generate awareness of the importance of considering sex and gender in research.

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<sup>5</sup> The University of Toronto offers a course in women's health with the Women's College Research Institute.

### *Move the needle on research inequity*

Salary award programs provide researchers or clinicians the opportunity to conduct health research by contributing to their salary. In Canada, women's health researchers receive only 7% of new investigator salary awards awarded by CIHR<sup>6</sup>, and less than 1% of all other health research salary awards. With CIHR strategic planning, the existing salary programs are vulnerable to sun-setting. Additionally, women are less likely to progress through the academic system due to the leaky pipeline effect.

The centre will recognize the unique and important contribution of women's health researchers, including new and mid-career investigators, clinician scientists and research chairs.

## **LOOKING FORWARD**

The Centre for Innovation + Excellence in Women's Health Research will improve women's health across the country. It will leverage governmental and philanthropic funding, implementing the aforementioned strategies to ensure an integrative approach to women's health research.

We believe this centre would be an incredible augmentation of the recent commitment of the CIHR to improve both access to funding and the amount of funding provided to women's health research. Without this investment these commitments are incremental in nature and will take decades to correct the bias and imbalance experienced in women's health research and its impact on the health of the women of Canada.

**BCWHF is asking the Federal Government to provide \$50 million in a one-time capital investment towards the building of the Centre.**

**BCWHF is asking the Federal Government for an annual commitment of \$25 million, increasing to \$40 million after three years, to support the overall operations of the Centre and portions of the research programming.**

We have an opportunity to improve the lives of women across Canada and positively impact gender equality, Indigenous health, immigrant women, female representation in STEM and our economy.

**Incremental change is not enough. We need intentional and transformational funding in women's health research with the National Centre for Innovation + Excellence in Women's Health Research.**

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<sup>6</sup> CIHR salary awards: 2008-2015