

## **CANADIAN INSTITUTES OF HEALTH RESEARCH'S SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH (HESA) STUDY ON MENTAL HEALTH AND COVID-19**

Through the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Government of Canada recognizes the importance of funding and mobilizing innovative and timely research to improve health outcomes for people with mental illness, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. CIHR's research and knowledge translation initiatives aim to provide timely, high quality, and relevant evidence to decision makers at municipal, provincial, territorial, and federal levels. This brief intends to supplement the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health's study by contributing additional information on CIHR's activities to support and translate COVID-19 and mental health research.

### **CIHR and COVID-19 and Mental Health Research**

On April 23, 2020, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Minister of Health Patty Hajdu announced a \$115 million investment in Canada's rapid research response to COVID-19. As part of this investment, led by its Institute of Neurosciences, Mental Health and Addiction, CIHR launched the *COVID-19 and Mental Health Initiative*, in close collaboration with Health Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada and others. The goal of the initiative is to provide evidence to decision makers and practitioners on mental health and substance use responses in the context of COVID-19. To date, CIHR has launched three funding opportunities under this initiative, supporting a total of 101 projects for a total investment of \$13.5M from CIHR and partners.

#### ***1. Rapid Knowledge Synthesis and Mobilization***

In April 2020, CIHR launched a funding opportunity for rapid knowledge synthesis and mobilization of current evidence on mental health services needs, delivery and guidelines, practice and related issues, in the COVID-19 context. This enabled the development of rapid and timely knowledge syntheses to address evidence gaps and build the evidence base as part of the mental health and substance use response to COVID-19. In total, [45 projects](#) were funded, representing a total investment of \$2.2M from CIHR and partners, including projects considering the unique needs of priority populations such as people who use drugs and substance use; children, youth and families; older Canadians; and healthcare, front-line workers and public safety personnel, among others.

The final reports of these projects were received in late November 2020. These include evidence such as those of Dr. Marjorie Montreuil and her research team from McGill University, who found that children and adolescents living in families economically affected by the pandemic are more vulnerable to negative effects on their mental health. Given their socio-economic status, equitable access to technology-based mental health services – the most widespread intervention – will be critical to the response.

Knowledge mobilization efforts are being planned to offer timely, accessible and relevant evidence to decision makers at municipal, provincial/territorial, and federal levels. Summaries of these reports have also been made available on the [CIHR website](#), including:

- [The Relationship Between Social Connectedness and Mental Health for Residents of Long-term Care Homes: Knowledge Synthesis and Mobilization](#);
- [COVID-19 Physical Distancing and Post-Traumatic Stress Injury: A Rapid Review of Virtual Trauma-Focused Therapy for Military, Veterans and Public Safety Personnel](#);
- [Supporting Children and Adolescents' Mental Health in the Context of Pandemic and Confinement: A Scoping Review of Interventions and Ethical Challenges](#);
- [Digital Health Solutions to Support Women with Addiction During COVID-19: Applying a Gender- and Trauma-Informed Lens](#).

## **2. CRISM Guidelines**

Funded by CIHR, the Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Misuse (CRISM) is a national research consortium created in 2015 focused on substance use disorders, comprising four large interdisciplinary regional teams (nodes) representing British Columbia, the Prairie Provinces, Ontario, and Quebec/Atlantic. At the beginning of the pandemic, CIHR provided CRISM with a \$1M grant to undertake urgent activities to support people who use drugs, decision-makers and care providers in light of COVID-19. This includes the creation of six national guidance documents as well as a rapid assessment of the challenges faced by people who use drugs during the COVID-19 crisis to identify areas of most urgent need, make recommendations for improvements to services, and guide future policy decisions. The resulting national guidance documents are publicly available and cover the following topics:

- [Supporting People Who Use Substances in Shelter Settings During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [Telemedicine Support for Addiction Services](#)
- [Harm Reduction Worker Safety during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [Strategies to Reduce SARS-CoV-2 Transmission in Supportive Recovery Programs and Residential Addiction Treatment Services](#)
- [Supporting People Who Use Substance in Acute Care Settings during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [Medications and other Clinical Approaches to Support Physical Distancing for People Who Use Substances During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

Stakeholders can sign up for webinars for an overview of all of the guidance or each of the guidance documents, or view past webinars for reference.

The rapid assessment report on the impact of COVID-19 on people who use drugs in Canada is expected to be available by late Spring 2021.

## **3. COVID-19 Mental Health & Substance Use Service Needs and Delivery**

CIHR subsequently launched the *COVID-19 Mental Health & Substance Use Service Needs and Delivery* funding opportunity in June 2020 to advance research on understanding rapid system transformations, developing innovative adaptations of services and/or delivery and matching

access to service with needs. This funding opportunity is addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and its containment measures on mental health and substance use.

In total, 55 projects were funded in September 2020, representing a total investment of \$10.3M from CIHR and partners. This includes a project led by Dr. Brianna J. Turner and her team at the University of Victoria. Their project will track the prevalence, incidence and rate of mental health and substance use problems in Canada, focusing on the demographic and geographic distribution of suicide risk factors both in the population and at a more fine-grained level, in three at-risk groups: frontline health workers, Indigenous Peoples and people living in rural or remote areas.

The mid-term reports for the 55 funded grants are expected at the end of February 2021.

### **Supporting Knowledge Translation Activities to Provide Research Evidence to Policy Makers and Health Care Providers**

CIHR is rapidly mobilizing knowledge from COVID-19 and Mental Health investments through a comprehensive strategy targeting knowledge users in policy, practice and research, as well as the general public. In the first half of 2021, CIHR will deliver and promote written products outlining the results and cross-cutting themes emerging from all of the 45 knowledge synthesis projects, and will host a series of webinars highlighting current knowledge on virtual mental health and substance use care in the context of COVID-19, the impact of the pandemic on mental health of women, and the impact of the pandemic on people who use drugs.

In the second half of 2021, CIHR will also mobilize knowledge from the 55 *Mental Health & Substance Use Service Needs and Delivery* projects to directly inform municipal, provincial/territorial, and federal level responses to the mental health and substance use impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to its investments that support the creation of new knowledge, CIHR's Best Brains Exchange (BBE) program supports one-day, in-camera meetings for decision makers and researchers with expertise on a topic that has been identified as a high priority by provincial/territorial ministries of health and the Health Portfolio. In November 2020, CIHR hosted a BBE on 'Innovations in Virtual Care for Mental Health and Substance Use' in collaboration with the British Columbia Ministry of Health, British Columbia Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions, and Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research. This BBE brought together provincial policy and decision makers, researchers and implementation experts, non-governmental organizations and other key stakeholders to gain an understanding of how virtual care can meet the unique and evolving mental health and substance use service needs of British Columbia's diverse population during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through investments in funding initiatives and knowledge translation activities such as these, CIHR has supported, and will continue to support, the creation of new scientific knowledge and is working to enable its translation into effective health services and products and improved health outcomes for people with mental illness and people who use drugs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Should you require further information on CIHR's role in Canada's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Strong', enclosed within a circular flourish.

Dr. Michael J. Strong, MD, FRCPC, FAAN, FCAHS  
President  
Canadian Institutes of Health Research