

Easing the burden of chronic illness

Researchers at the University of New Brunswick are combining their resources to help improve the quality of the health care people suffering from chronic illness receive.

UNB celebrated the official opening of the Chronic Illness Research Institute (CIRI) in early June. It's a new centre for research that will see collaboration between UNB's two campuses and St. Thomas University, as well as communities across New Brunswick.

Combining the efforts of numerous researchers, CIRI aims to approach chronic illness with an eclectic disciplinary and community perspective to make coping with chronic disease an easier experience.

Barbara Paterson, Barbara Paterson, a Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in Chronic Illness at UNB Fredericton, is the director of CIRI.

"The complex questions that are plaguing us now as we deal with increasing incidence of chronic illness require more than one disciplinary perspective," she explains. "We recognized that there were a lot of people doing health research in New Brunswick, but health researchers have tended to conduct research within only their disciplines."

Researchers involved in CIRI come from a wide variety of backgrounds, including biomedical engineering, kinesiology, gerontology, social geography, history and nursing. Examining chronic illness from a variety of perspectives will allow the institute to determine what's best for those suffering from them.

Taking the community on board

Researchers with CIRI aren't just looking at chronic illness from their own perspectives - Paterson and her team are going directly into communities to learn about chronic illnesses from people who cope with them every day.

"We're figuring out if we're asking the right questions, and whether our methods actually suit people," says Paterson.

Brenda Mercer is one such person. A graduate student at UNB, she's afflicted with both diabetes and chronic obstructive lung disease, or COPD. She knows what it's like to live daily with chronic disease, and says that CIRI is taking the right approach.

"This approach looks for the best practices that are out there to aid people with chronic illness - not only treat them, but also to help manage their disease," says Mercer.

The research institute doesn't just want to improve the quality of care for people suffering from chronic illnesses. It also wants to help prevent the various diseases as much as possible. As a former smoker, Mercer is interested to see what research determines to be the most effective inhibitor of smoking habits.

CIRI's multidisciplinary approach will allow it to examine which approaches to illness-causing habits like smoking are most effective. By seeing what's already out there - in terms of existing research and real people suffering from chronic illness - the institute will strive to find the most effective treatments and management plans.

"They get a broad spectrum of what's out there," says Mercer. "They've identified the needs of people so greatly."

The right location

UNB is just the right size, with just the right amount of research to be home to a major multidisciplinary facility like CIRI.

"Although all universities have people who are very interested in chronic illness and have contributions to make, UNB is poised right now by the nature of how many research chairs we have, and how many experienced researchers we have, to provide the support and training that is going to be part of the institute," says Paterson.

In line with the practical nature of CIRI's research, she wants the centre to train students to become community-based researchers, and to train communities who want to do their own research.

"I think this is the best location for that."

UNB also benefits from the centre, as it provides a united front for the school's chronic illness research - making it more competitive in terms of funding.



"It will position UNB as a centre of excellence in research in chronic illness. Chronic disease is the number one issue facing governments and the people of Canada in regard to health. The Institute will make a very important contribution to determining solutions that will reduce the amount of chronic disease and chronic disease-related complications."