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2007

2006

2005

2004

2003

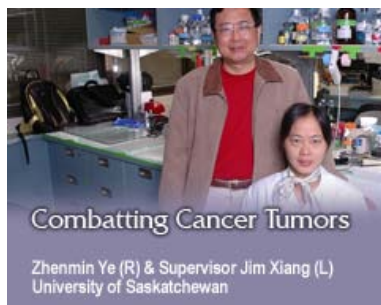
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Health Research Week 2008 - Community-based approach key to mental health and additions treatment

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Community-based approach key to mental health and additions treatment

By *Mona Etcheverry*

For Raymond Tempier, mental health problems and addictions are different faces of the same problem.

"Most people with addictions have a mental problem either before or after the addiction. Using alcohol or a street drug is often a form of self-medication."

Tempier is professor and head of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Saskatchewan. Together with Colleen Anne Dell, a U of S sociologist and Research Chair in Substance Abuse, he co-chairs the six-member Saskatchewan Team for Research and Evaluation of Addictions Treatment and Mental Health Services (STREAM).

STREAM works to identify gaps and opportunities in our knowledge of addictions and mental health, with a focus on culturally appropriate treatment services for Aboriginal people.

"The Aboriginal view of the world is different in several ways from western approaches to health and healing," Tempier says. "If we want to improve services for First Nations and Métis people, then we need to rethink the way services are distributed and offered at the community level and work from a more holistic understanding."



Raymond Tempier and Colleen Dell co-chair STREAM at the University of Saskatchewan. The group is working together with First Nations and Métis community groups to improve mental health and addictions services. Photo: Debra Marshall for SHRF

STREAM is about learning. "It brings together people who are in different disciplines."

For Dell, STREAM is about learning: expertise and experience are shared among the team and community members. Team members may help an addiction centre develop client surveys and share with them how to evaluate results. In turn, community members share their knowledge about traditional cultural approaches to treatment.

"It brings together people who are in different disciplines, mostly psychiatry and sociology, with community-based First Nation and Métis organizations," Dell says. "We want to find out from them what their needs are, what experiences they have, and how we might fill any gaps." One in five Canadians will have a mental illness at some point in their lives according to the Canadian Mental Health Association. A recent Canadian addictions survey shows nearly 80 per cent of adult Canadians drink, most in moderation, while 14 per cent have used marijuana in the past year.

Compare this with a Native Addictions Partnership Foundation report that shows Aboriginal people drink less – and drink less often – than the general public. Aboriginal people do, however, have higher levels of heavy use.

Dell says anyone can be affected, whether through a family member or friend with an addiction or by drunk drivers on our roads.

STREAM has already begun work with the Métis Addiction Council of Saskatchewan (MACSI), Building a Nation (a counselling centre in Saskatoon), the White Bear First Nation near Carlyle, and the Youth Solvent Addictions Committee. This last is a group of nine First Nations youth residential treatment centres from various regions of Canada, which blend traditional and mainstream treatment approaches.

"We'll continue building partnerships," Tempier says. "We'll be looking to the SFIN (Saskatchewan Federation of Indian Nations) and outside Saskatoon. We're interested in meeting with Elders and counsellors living on reserves and in urban and rural areas to find out how they deal with mental health and addiction problems and how we may be able to contribute."

STREAM's initial grant from the Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation has already helped to leverage two more grant applications to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, including one for emerging teamwork.

As more work is done with the community organizations, Tempier sees opportunities for workshops and retreats involving the researchers and community workers. He also plans to pass on best practices learned to policy makers to help improve addictions and mental health care for First Nations and Métis people.

Dell expects that knowledge will be transferred throughout the project as new approaches and information are integrated along the way.

"Discussions with one treatment centre could be around understanding research processes and an exchange of literature and about Aboriginal research methodologies. We do a lot of research in academia but those in the community don't typically have time when they're working to save lives."

"When it comes to finding answers, their voices and experiences are as important as the researchers from the proverbial university 'ivory tower'," Dell says. "But our end goal is the same: helping people."

This article first appeared in the Regina *Leader-Post* and Saskatoon *StarPhoenix* special section for Health Research Week 2008.

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