

Ontario Government Rewards Province's 'Best and Brightest'

By Alisa Kim

Prestigious award allows Sunnybrook researcher to focus on improving mental health care of youth with depression

Imagine being overwhelmed by feelings of sadness, guilt and hopelessness for weeks or months on end. Add to that changes in eating and sleeping habits, little interest in regular activities, as well as the normal emotional turbulence of being a teen, and you will begin to understand some of the crippling effects of clinical depression upon young people.

"Depression is a real illness that occurs very commonly," says Dr. Amy Cheung, a researcher in the brain sciences research program at Sunnybrook Research Institute and psychiatrist at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre. "In a class of high-school students, there will be up to five students who have experienced, or will experience, an episode of depression. Among those, about 60% of them will have a recurrence."

Cheung, who treats adolescents and young adults with mood disorders, was recently recognized by the Ontario government with a Career Scientist award for her research into improving the delivery of mental health services to youth aged 16 and 24 with depression.

The five-year award from the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care supports the province's top health services researchers early in their careers. Of the 32 contenders, Cheung was one of only six to be thus honoured. It will enable her to devote at least 75% of her time to research.

"I'm very excited about the opportunity to continue my research with increased protected time from my clinical work, and to work more closely with Ministry staff to have an impact on policy and the direction of health care in Ontario," said Cheung, who is also an assistant professor at the University of Toronto. "Hopefully the results of my research will help inform how the Ministry funds and provides mental health services to adolescents."

Using population-based surveys from Ontario, Cheung will identify which youth are receiving mental health services from their family doctors and factors associated with the use of those services, including socioeconomic background and education. She will also evaluate the effectiveness of screening for depression in youth to improve mental health care in family health teams.

According to national statistics from the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), about 5% of male youth and 12% of female youth, aged 12 to 19, have experienced a major depressive episode. The CMHA also reports that treatment can help 80% of people with depression, allowing them to resume their usual activities.

Cheung hopes that her research will help determine how to best use existing mental health care resources, and equip family doctors and pediatricians to treat younger patients with depression by raising awareness of the disease.

"There is still a lot of stigma related to being diagnosed with a mental illness like depression," she says. "Among [health care] providers there's a need for greater education to help them understand that these illnesses are common and [that] they can play a key role in helping these patients."