

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Emerging Leaders in Health Promotion

Improving the quality of life of seniors with dementia, including reducing stress for the dementia sufferers and caregiver/family burnout, was the motivation behind Dr. Catherine Cheng's [Emerging Leaders in Health Promotion](#) project (2016-17 grant year).

The objectives for Dr. Cheng's ELiHP project, *Use of novel multi-sensory dementia tools to improve quality of life of seniors with dementia and their caregivers*, included:

1. To create a useful and accessible multi-sensory dementia tool to benefit the user by minimizing stressful symptoms associated with dementia, such as fidgeting, restlessness, wandering behaviors and agitation, and by doing so, to reduce caregiver burnout.
2. To provide awareness/education sessions, a symposium on optimizing brain health for seniors in the community about the signs and symptoms of dementia, and prevention strategies to maintain quality brain health.

With her desire to create and introduce a multi-sensory tool to individuals with dementia, Dr. Cheng identified a gap that existed in treatment of seniors with dementia for whom traditional recreation and brain-stimulating activities were too complex.

"I wanted to introduce a multi-sensory dementia tool to this patient group, to assist with the maintenance of brain function and stimulation and to improve the care and quality of life amongst seniors with dementia, by minimizing the associated stressful symptoms," she explains.

Over a period of several months, the project involved 20 seniors in the community (residents of Edmonton's Mountwood Apartments, ranging from normal cognition to moderate dementia). All had an interest in knitting and a desire to help other seniors with dementia. They made 150 of the tools – described as "a hand-knitted, cylinder-shaped hand-warmer with numerous tactile and sensory elements attached to the inside and outside."

The second part of the project entailed three education sessions and a full-day symposium (held in the Mountwood Apartment's recreation room). This was arranged with assistance from the [Greater Edmonton Foundation \(GEF\) Seniors Housing](#) staff and the contribution of materials/information on local resources for distribution during the education sessions and symposium by [Sage Seniors Association](#) and the [Fountain of Health Initiative](#).



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Dr. Catherine Cheng

As Dr. Cheng reflects on the leadership and advocacy skills she acquired through the development and implementation of her ELiHP project, she notes how the project “helped me develop abilities in interacting with the community in promoting good health, with the ultimate goal of benefitting seniors living with a major neurocognitive disorder.

“This project also taught me about the research process and helped me develop skills and greater confidence in navigating a complex health care system,” Dr. Cheng adds. “It was an inspiring experience, as an early career clinician, to see the impact that physicians can make through health promotion and advocacy.”

Mentorship and collegial support

Dr. Cheng’s mentor for her ELiHP project was Dr. John McCahill, a geriatric psychiatrist at the Villa Caritas Hospital in Edmonton. Dr. McCahill has been working with seniors with dementia and their caregivers for many years and has extensive knowledge in the assessment, diagnosis and management of individuals with major neurocognitive disorders. Dr. McCahill’s clinical expertise contributed to the development of the multi-sensory dementia tool and to the identification of the effect that the tool would have on older adults. “His familiarity with the organization of geriatric psychiatric services in the Edmonton zone was also invaluable,” Dr. Cheng notes.

In addition to her gratitude for Dr. McCahill’s guidance, Dr. Cheng acknowledges the assistance and support of Dr. Jorge Perez-Parada and Dr. Glen Baker, who provided feedback and input at various stages of the project.

Final word ... physicians as health promoters

“The Emerging Leaders in Health Promotion grant program provided a unique opportunity to explore the fundamental role of physicians as health promoters and advocates in the community,” comments Dr. Cheng. “I learned the importance of health promotion and advocacy in disease prevention and patient care, beyond the treatment of disease processes,” she adds.

About the ELiHP grant program

The [Emerging Leaders in Health Promotion \(ELiHP\) grant program](#) provides funding to help medical students and resident physicians conceive and implement health promotion projects in support of the development of their CanMEDS/FM core competencies, particularly health advocacy.

Sponsored by the Alberta Medical Association, [MD Financial Management](#), the [Canadian Medical Association](#) and its subsidiary, [Joule](#), ELiHP projects facilitate the growth of physician leadership and advocacy skills in a mentored environment, while enhancing the well-being of the general Alberta population through education, advocacy and innovative care.