

Sharing What We're Doing

In March 2005, CURA partners launched a five-year study designed to explore, develop, implement and evaluate ways of providing community-based mental health services and supports effectively for people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

1. Building Community Connections

One of the first activities in this CURA involved visits with the five cultural-linguistic communities partnering in this study (Somali, Latin American, Punjabi, Mandarin, Polish) in both Waterloo Region and Toronto. The visits were a formal invitation to the communities to collaborate on the CURA study. It was also an opportunity to share information, and strengthen working relationships. We gathered initial information about each community's approach to mental health issues, and invited community members to select someone to sit on the CURA Steering Committee in their city.

Joanna Ochocka (CURA Director), Rich Janzen (CREHS Research Director), and Julie Wise (CURA Coordinator) took turns visiting the communities. One of our CURA partners, Nora Jacobson (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health) attended the visits with the Toronto Hispanic community.

The ten community visits took place between May and September in a variety of locations in Waterloo and in Toronto. In some communities, pre-meetings were also held for a total of 17 meetings. Some of the Waterloo communities met with us at the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services. A few of the Toronto meetings were held at St. Joseph's Health Centre, one of our CURA partner sites. The visits with the Waterloo and Toronto Punjabi communities were held with the assistance of interpreters.

Diverse perspectives

Many participants raised questions about the terminology used in English: mental illness, mental health, serious mental health problems. For many, these words hold stigma and are, therefore, problematic. For some, the words do not hold the same meaning in their language. For example, members of the Toronto Somali community told us that mental illness does not include depression and stress in their culture. For their community, mental illness is an extreme state of illness and, therefore, a taboo subject.

The Waterloo Mandarin community explained that there is no single word in their language to express the Western concept of mental health. The Waterloo Hispanic community pointed out that they are unlikely to use the words

"mental health problems". Instead, they are more comfortable speaking about their stress-related symptoms: "I am sad", "I can't sleep", "I am nervous". This concern about terminology led to interesting discussions and the understanding of how important it is to find the right approach and language for each community.



Joanna Ochocka (second from right) and Julie Wise (fourth from left) join members of the Golden Sikh Temple following their visit with the Waterloo Punjabi community

Terminology was not the only issue raised. The spiritual beliefs and practices of cultural communities also play an important role in approaches to health and wellbeing. Chinese medicine takes a holistic approach to health, in which mental health is connected to physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. The Waterloo Mandarin community explained that this is why they do not have a separate term for mental health. Some communities seek the support and counsel of family, elders and traditional healers rather than mainstream medical services. While this is part of their cultural tradition, it also occurs because mainstream mental health service providers often do not understand the impact of stigma attached to the label of mental illness within some cultural communities.

Sharing stories

The meetings included community residents, as well as clinicians, settlement workers and social workers. Some shared personal stories of stress and pressures, sometimes related to their migration experiences, and sometimes related to living in Canada. They mentioned the isolation of living far from the traditional support of extended families, and the challenges of facing linguistic and racial barriers, of having to support their families yet being unemployed, of not having academic skills and experience recognized, and not knowing where to turn for support. Practitioners spoke of the mental health challenges they see within their own communities, and the difficulties their clients, friends and families face in accessing the support services they need. Single parents with troubled teenagers described their sense of isolation far from the support of family and friends. Others mentioned the stress in dealing with ill and elderly family members who do not speak English, and have no connections outside of their children's home.

"We want to be good citizens, work hard, get money, buy a house, bring our family over. Immigrants have much stress when they move because all is happening at the same time. We don't know about resources. We don't get a chance to connect with community support. We feel overwhelmed."

- Mandarin community member

2. Forming Steering Committees

In addition to sharing their stories, each community also selected one member to be their representative on one of the CURA Steering Committees. There are two Steering Committees: one in Toronto and one in Waterloo. Each Steering Committee guides the research conducted in that site, including the formulation of research methods and tools, data collection and analysis, and dissemination strategies.

The Steering Committees began meeting in September and will continue to meet four to five times per year over the next five years. Each Steering Committee includes representatives from the five cultural-linguistic groups involved in the study, academics and community service providers from the CURA partnership, and consumer/survivors. In addition, each Steering Committee also has a representative from the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services to provide continuity and a consistent line of communication with the Partnership Group.

3. Expanding the research team

Over the summer, the first of an ongoing series of graduate students from CURA partner universities (University of Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University, University of Toronto) were hired to assist with CURA research. Students worked with academic partners to conduct a review of international literature relevant to the CURA study.

CURA Literature Review Team

Academic partner	Graduate student
Augie Fleras (UW)	Elin Moorlag (UW)
Anne Westhues (WLU)	Jill Grant (WLU)
Nora Jacobson (U of T)	Marcie Mckay (WLU)
Laura Simich (U of T)	Rachel Fayter (WLU)

The November issue of CURA Findings provides a summary of the initial results of the literature review.

The CURA research team is about to expand further with the hiring of community facilitators/co-researchers from each of the five cultural-linguistic communities. These individuals will focus on organizing forums and meetings within their communities and assist in research tasks such as co-facilitating focus groups, co-conducting interviews, and providing translation and interpretation support. Interviews for these positions are being conducted this fall and the community facilitators/co-researchers are expected to begin their work in January 2006.

4. Closing thoughts

Each community we visited raised the issue of stigma related to mental health. Given the cultural pressures within their communities around mental illness, it was encouraging to note how many people were willing to come to our site visits and talk openly about the stresses they face and their community's perceptions of mental health and mental illness. For many, this meant going against the norms of their culture, yet they were willing to do so because they recognized the seriousness of the issue and the need for systemic change.

These communities are looking to this CURA study for collaboration in making change possible: working with their respective communities to find ways to provide effective support to people with mental illness, and their families.

Next Steps

Fall 2005

- Steering Committees continue their work in Toronto and Waterloo Region
- Hire and train members of cultural-linguistic communities as community researchers
- Data gathering starts (key-informant interviews)

Winter 2006

- Data gathering continues (agency survey, focus groups with cultural-linguistic communities)
- Literature review continues

For more information, www.crehscura.com