

# Royal Ottawa to take on depression with state-of-the-art \$25-million centre

BY PAULINE TAM, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN MAY 7, 2010

At a time when budget pressures are forcing Ontario hospitals to rein in spending, the Royal Ottawa Health Care Group is drawing up plans for a \$25-million research centre devoted to improve the diagnosis and treatment of depression.

The psychiatric hospital is poised to launch a five-year fundraising campaign to expand facilities and buy state-of-the-art equipment, which would allow a team of 24 psychiatrists and researchers to bring new and experimental treatments to depression sufferers.

Dr. Zul Merali, head of the research institute affiliated with the Royal Ottawa, said the proposed centre would be modelled after the University of Ottawa Heart Institute, which has clinicians and researchers working side-by-side to advance the diagnosis and treatment of heart disease.

"Under the same roof, you want excellent care and you want excellent research going on simultaneously," said Merali. "I think we do this very successfully for other illnesses. Why don't we do the same for mental illness?"

Depression is a leading cause of disability in the industrialized world; one in five Canadians reports having been diagnosed with the illness at some point in their lives. According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, mental illness is the fastest-growing source of workplace disability. Much of that is being driven by rising rates of depression, which is estimated to cost Canada and the U.S. \$52 billion a year in lost productivity.

Yet despite recent efforts to reduce the social stigma of mental illness, mental health remains a poor cousin to other fields of medicine, receiving only about five per cent of the \$1 billion Canada spends annually on health research, said Merali.

As a result, despite a clear need for better ways to diagnose and treat depression, progress has been slow. The proposed research centre would be a step toward addressing that imbalance, said Merali.

True clinical depression is a mood disorder in which feelings of sadness, anxiety, helplessness or anger interfere with everyday life for months or even years. The symptoms vary from person to person, yet the methods used to diagnose and treat depression are far from personalized.

People with depression are diagnosed through standardized question-and-answer interviews to determine whether they have symptoms. Merali foresees a time when depression could be diagnosed in the same way heart disease and cancer are detected: through a simple blood test and a diagnostic scan. Such speedy and precise methods are currently being used experimentally, but scientists believe they could one day become common practice.

At the Royal Ottawa, Drs. Pierre Blier and Georg Northoff are using blood tests and brain scans to

