O
ver the past two decades, mental health research has been funded primarily by public money. What is the payback from these investments? How can we increase the benefits of research in the future?

This is a fundamental question for psychiatrists. Evidence-based practice is the foundation of our profession and many of us are actively engaged in research. The Canadian Psychiatric Association (CPA) promotes the translation of knowledge into practice through The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, its scientific journal, and the CPA Annual Conference, the largest educational event in psychiatry in Canada, where psychiatrists present their latest research findings.

A recent international study, employing case studies from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, attempts to answer the question about research benefits and payback. Mental Health Innovation: Understanding the returns from schizophrenia (lessons from schizophrenia) looks at payback through: knowledge; drive innovation and improve lives. The study suggests that clinical research, where researchers involve patients, results in more – and more rapidly adopted – innovations in evidence-based patient care than basic research. Basic brain research in the last 20 years has had limited direct application to treating patients. This suggests that while basic research may be needed over the long-term, for a more immediate translation of research results into practical applications, funding should be directed towards clinical research innovations. This finding aligns closely with the Council of the Federation’s Health Care Innovation: Working Group’s efforts to accelerate the adoption of innovations that improve the health of Canadians, the care they receive and overall value-for-money.

An interesting and significant finding is that researchers’ motivations matter. Researchers motivated by patient needs, with a practical application in mind, can drive the development and implementation of innovations.

My colleague, Dr. Don Addington, Chair of the CPA Board of Directors, and a leading expert on schizophrenia, can testify to the importance of motivation. “As someone who has done extensive research into effective treatments for schizophrenia, I know my engagement with patients, my in-depth knowledge of the disease, and my desire to achieve a specific outcome, fundamentally affects the kind of research I do,” says Dr. Addington.

But over the short-term, even though innovative interventions are developed, there may be no dramatic shift in patient care. Treatments that prove very effective may take years to be adopted or may be used in some regions and not others.

Why is this? Failure exists at both the clinical and systems levels. Implementation into clinical practice depends on professional and healthcare organizations, government funders and regulators supporting and regulating the adoption of innovations. Thus, this involves population-based planning and fidelity measurement. Palby tells us the extent to which the intervention adheres to the delivery protocol or program model originally developed. At the systems level, access and continuity of care are not well-integrated into our mental health system.

How can we translate promising innovations into effective evidence-based treatments more rapidly? A long-term accelerated strategy is required. One potential model is the Transformational Research in Adolescent Mental Health (TRAM) network, funded by the Graham Boeckh Foundation and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. The study suggests that while basic research may be used in some regions and not others.

Dr. Michael Teahan
President, Canadian Psychiatric Association

Investments in Mental Health Research Create Knowledge, Drive Innovation and Improve Lives

How can we increase the benefits of research in the future? The federal government can play a leadership role by supporting mental health research innovation and working with the provinces and territories to accelerate the adoption of applied innovations that currently exist in pockets across the country. In addition to identifying knowledge and research gaps, CPA members can help translate new knowledge into practical interventions to improve mental health treatments and clinical decision-making.

Recognizing the relationship between research and its potential impact on health system performance, the Canadian Psychiatric Association advocates for key mental health system attributes:

• Populations-based planning with clear performance measures
• Measurable goals for timely access to patient-centred, evidence-based care
• A transparent funding process and an equitable share of health care funding

Dr. Michael Teahan
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