

## *Happenings*

# **CIHR's Institute of Aging: Improving the Health and Quality of Life of Older Canadians**

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In the next 25 years Canada will experience a remarkable demographic change as the senior population grows. The proportion of persons aged 65 and over will increase from 13% in 2001 to 22% in 2026 (Statistics Canada, 2003). An important question is whether this aging society will be accompanied by improved health and quality of life and by sufficient social and economic resources in terms of health services. Consequently, research on aging should be at the forefront of the health research agenda in Canada.

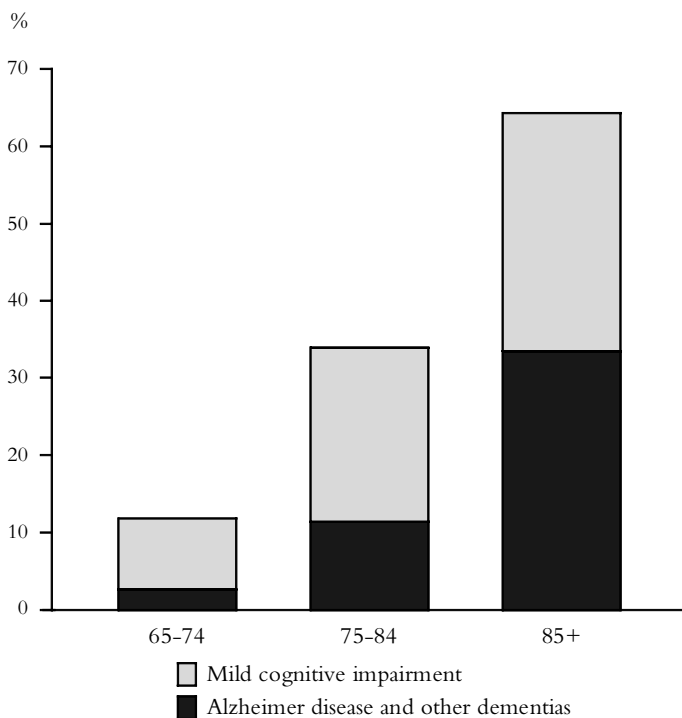
### **The Institute of Aging**

The Institute of Aging, one of 13 institutes of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, was created in 2001. Its goal is to advance knowledge in the field of aging to ultimately improve the health and quality of life of older Canadians. To achieve its goal, the Institute leads in the development and definition of strategic directions for Canadian research in the field of aging. The Institute also supports research on aging processes, age-related diseases and disabilities, conditions associated with aging, emerging needs of older Canadians, and health services for the elderly population. The work of the Institute encompasses the four themes of health research: biomedical, clinical, health services, and policy and socio-cultural aspects of health. Through consultations with researchers and various stakeholders, the Institute has identified five priority areas for research on aging and health: healthy and successful aging, biological mechanisms of aging, cognitive impairment in aging, aging and maintenance of functional autonomy, and health services and policy relating to older people. During the first 2 years of its existence, the Institute of Aging has undertaken several strategic initiatives and programs in response to the growing needs of Canada's aging population.

### Cognitive Impairment in Aging

Aging is associated with a high prevalence of cognitive impairment, including Alzheimer disease and other types of dementia such as vascular dementia (Figure 1). Cognitive impairment in aging (CIA) affects one in four Canadians over the age of 65, and the prevalence rises dramatically, to two out of three, for Canadians over the age of 85 (Canadian Study of Health and Aging Working Group, 1994). With an aging population, the number of cases of cognitive impairment is expected to double over the next 30 years. This problem not only threatens the quality of life of older people, but also has an impact on their families and caregivers, as the emotional suffering is considerable. Furthermore, cognitive impairment challenges health services and is a financial burden on the health-care system.

**Figure 1** *Prevalence of Cognitive Impairment in Canada*



Source: Adapted from Canadian Study of Health and Aging Working Group (1994).

The Institute of Aging is leading the development of a National Research Strategy on Cognitive Impairment in Aging. As part of the strategy, a CIA partnership was established in 2002 to address the need for cognitive-impairment research. The partnership brings together leading organizations from the voluntary, public, and private sectors with a shared interest in reducing the prevalence and impact of cognitive impairment. The Alzheimer Society of Canada (ASC), the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, and the Canadian Nurses Foundation (CNF) are among the partners. The CIA partnership has already made notable accomplishments in the area of new funding opportunities for research in cognitive impairment. Some of the partnered initiatives that have been implemented are intended to build research capacity and include doctoral awards and Young Investigator grants. Also, the CIA partners plan to launch several Requests for Applications (RFAs), including an RFA on caregiving and Alzheimer disease. The Institute will partner with the ASC and the CNF to launch this RFA, which is aimed at supporting research into all aspects of caring for individuals with Alzheimer disease and/or their caregivers.

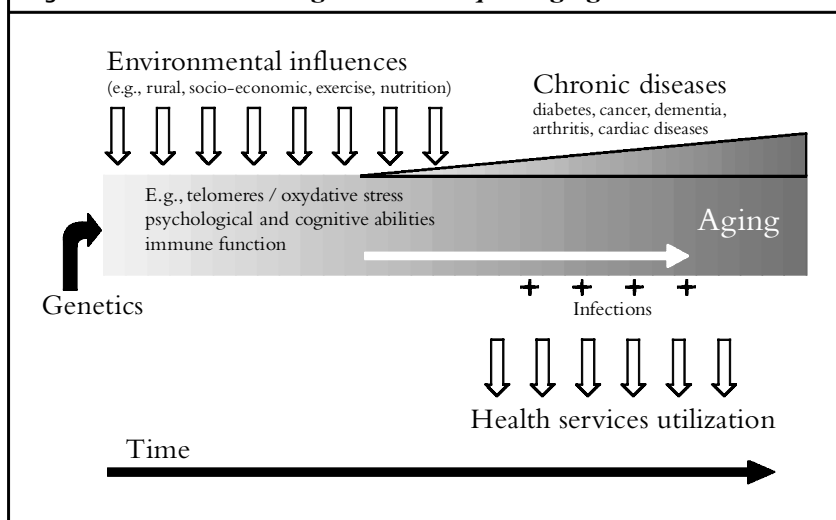
The next few years will see continued growth of the CIA partnership, with a focus on its research agenda and investment strategy.

### **Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging**

A framework for a Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging (CLSA) was designed to increase knowledge in the areas of healthy aging, chronic diseases, genetics, health-services utilization, and environmental influences on health. The CLSA will assemble a large representative cohort of some 50,000 Canadians aged 45 and older who will be followed for at least 20 years as they join the senior population. The study will examine genetic, immunologic, and molecular determinants; the effects of lifestyle; the evolution of physical, psychological, and cognitive abilities; and health-care utilization. As well, the study is expected to identify preventive strategies that will translate into practices, services, and policies (Figure 2). Ultimately, the CLSA will allow us to understand the mechanisms that underlie the process of aging and to distinguish aging from the effects of disease processes, cohort effects, and secular changes among the seniors of today and tomorrow.

Following implementation of the framework for the CLSA, a Request for Proposals for the protocol design was launched, and a team led by three principal investigators was chosen following an international review. More than two hundred collaborators and co-investigators from across the country will participate in the protocol development. It is expected that the final protocol for the CLSA will be evaluated by an international review board in early 2004.

Figure 2 *Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging Environment*



### National Seniors' Forum on Research

Health research is essential for the provision of effective health-care and social programs. Conversing with those on the receiving end of health-care and social programs developed through research on aging was the objective of the first National Seniors' Forum on Aging, held in May 2003. This event featured interactive discussions on the Institute of Aging and recent research trends in the field of aging, the role of older people on peer review panels and ethics review boards, informed consent for participation in health research, and the gaps between research and policy. More than 80 representatives from provincial, territorial, and national seniors' organizations, as well as government officials and researchers, participated in this event organized by the Institute of Aging and its partners. As suggested at the National Forum, the Institute of Aging is now preparing five Regional Forums to be held before or during March 2004.

### Capacity Building in the Field of Aging

The Institute of Aging has allocated considerable resources to building research capacity in aging. It has established a New Emerging Team (NET) grant to support the creation or development of teams of researchers undertaking collaborative multidisciplinary research in Canada. Through the NET program, the Institute and its partners are supporting several teams that have a strong component of nursing

research, including NETs on end-of-life care, the care of persons with dementia in rural and remote areas, and pain assessment and treatment programs for seniors.

### **Funding Opportunities for Nursing Research on Aging**

To meet the needs of the scientific community, research on aging has been integrated into the CIHR peer review process with the creation of two new committees, one on the biological and clinical aspects of aging and the other on the social dimensions of aging. Operating grants in the field of aging and specific strategic initiatives are now evaluated by these two committees. The Institute of Aging offers new opportunities for research funding and personnel support. For example, Pilot Project Grants in Aging are designed to support innovative ideas and to encourage established investigators to enter high-priority areas in the field of aging. In addition, the Institute recently launched a Mid-career Award in Aging to support researchers by allowing them time to devote to research and to support career reorientation for researchers who plan to enter targeted, high-priority areas of research on aging. Finally, to support health research in strategic areas in aging, the Institute, with its Priority Announcements, offers additional funding for highly rated applications that address its research priorities but did not receive funding through the CIHR open competition. It is expected that other initiatives will be proposed to the research community in aging over the coming months, and nurse researchers are encouraged to develop research within the area covered by the Institute's research priorities.

### **Translation and Use of Knowledge**

As part of its strategic orientation, the Institute of Aging is mandated to foster the dissemination and application of research findings by end-users, including health policy-makers, health professionals, and seniors. The Institute provides support to the Annual Canadian Research Forum on Aging, which is held in conjunction with the Canadian Association on Gerontology (CAG). This forum includes a keynote speaker and symposia on timely topics in research on aging. As well, a student poster competition is organized in partnership with the CAG, the Canadian Geriatrics Society, and the Canadian Gerontological Nursing Association. The Institute will continue to facilitate the dissemination and use of knowledge for the improved health of seniors.

Since its founding in 2001, the Institute of Aging has been actively involved in leading and implementing strategic projects as part of its first strategic plan. In the coming months the Institute will assess its actions undertaken so far and will define future research priorities and strategic

orientations, through consultations with stakeholders and the research community. This exercise will lead to the development of a second strategic plan to ensure the sustained growth of research on aging in Canada and its translation into better products, programs, services, and policy for the improved health and quality of life of older Canadians.

### **References**

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