

New directions for forensic research

With a progressive, recovery-based approach, Dr. Sandy Simpson reinvigorates CAMH's forensic research program

http://www.camh.ca/en/research/news_and_publications/CAMH-Discovers/fall-2013/Pages/New-directions-in-forensic-research.aspx

For CAMH Chief of Forensic Psychiatry, Dr. Sandy Simpson, there are issues to understand before a person encounters the legal system, in addition to what happens afterwards.

“What brings people into the criminal justice system, and what takes them out of it? How many in the prison system need mental health care – and what type of care is needed for different people?” He points to these as some of the numerous questions that need investigating.

“As CAMH is the largest provider of forensic mental health services in the province, we are well-positioned to establish ourselves as leaders in forensic research, working the context of providing high quality clinical care,” says Dr. Simpson, who has identified four strategic aims for forensic research at CAMH, after consulting widely within CAMH and externally.

Dr. Simpson joined CAMH in 2010 from New Zealand, where he developed a reputation for his progressive and comprehensive approach to forensic mental health care within a recovery and culture-based framework.

Several new studies are underway. In one, researchers are examining changes in mental health among 1,000 federal prisoners in Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta over the course of a year. This study, funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) will assess prisoners’ mental health and observe which factors or individual characteristics are related to changes that occur. Also to be examined is how mental health relates to prison incidents such as rule-breaking, assaults and self-harm, including suicidal behaviour.

“We expect the results will help us better understand the factors that contribute to mental health, and to prevent, detect and treat mental illness among prison populations,” he says.

Another major area is research in risk and recovery. Risk assessment – conducted by forensic clinicians in legal settings – indicate the likelihood of whether a person will re-offend or not, and which individuals may be at higher or lower risk. “Our approach is how to employ tools that assess risk in a recovery framework.”

The tool mostly widely globally used to assess violence risk, the Historical, Clinical, Risk Management-20 (HCR), has recently been revised to improve its ability to predict violence. Dr. Simpson’s team is one of the first in North America to study how well the updated tool works in field trials. They will be studying the tool among 120 forensic psychiatric patients, tracking them for six months to assess actual rates of violence.

Dr. Simpson also sees opportunities to expand into new areas of research, using brain imaging and genetics expertise at CAMH to understand biological factors associated with violence.

“If we can integrate our knowledge of clinical research and health care systems, with symptoms and biological information, it will provide us with a unique opportunity to understand different types of violence and identify different therapeutic needs,” he says.

Strategic Aims for Forensic Research

1. Mental illness, offending and the law
2. Sexual deviance and sexual offending: causes and treatments
3. Enhancing research and understanding of youth forensic needs
4. Establishing a national research training centre for forensic psychiatry.