



Affirming the Merit of the Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women's Health

A report presented to the MCEWH by Claudette Legault, Tides *Turning* Consultants.
January 2001.

“By 2005, the Centres of Excellence for Women’s Health Program (CEWHP) will be a vibrant, internationally recognized source of information, policy and clinical advice, innovative research methodologies and models of working on women’s health. The Program will draw together a strong and diverse network of researchers, clinicians, women’s organizations and policy makers in Canada and abroad. It will have a demonstrable impact on the treatment of diverse groups of women within the health system, on health planning, on the design of clinical trials and on all aspects of health research in Canada.”

CEWHP Plan of Action: Towards a Sustainable Future.

Review of Success Indicators

A mid-program review of the Centres of Excellence for Women’s Health was conducted in November 1999. The review was designed to yield observations, experiences and suggestions for the future of the national program overall. The report helped assess how each Centre was interpreting the mandate in setting out its research program and dissemination activities. It was not an evaluation of each Centre per se. In addition to the mid-program review each Centre was also to conduct its own internal review process.

Purpose of Success Indicators

The Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health identified the need to develop a document which would complement the mid-term review

by providing an overview of what the Centre considered to be success indicators or what the Centre's impact is in the Maritimes. This would serve to help focus future evaluations as well as provide a snap-shot for partners as to what difference the Centre is making in the region and on women's health.

Affirming the Merit of the Centre

During the process of developing indicators for the MCEWH, a number of common themes emerged which seem to speak to the overall impact and success of the MCEWH to date. What follows is a brief summary of some of the areas in which the MCEWH is seen to be having an impact and which may help shape future programming directions.

The MCEWH - A Model Worth Supporting

In the current political, economic and social context, new models of collaboration are required to respond to the health needs and issues of women. There is no one institution or body which has the capacity to deliver solutions to today's health needs on their own. Thus a new paradigm is required which promotes new models of partnership and ways of working together if we are to create a healthier society. The Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women's Health brings together the key stakeholders and people who have something to contribute to a new vision of health. This way of working and viewing health constitutes a new model of partnership which should be maintained and replicated on a broader scale. There has been a need for leadership in relation to developing a regional health agenda for women. The MCEWH appears to have the capacity to fill this leadership void and has taken the initiative to do this in a number of areas. The Centre has demonstrated a commitment and willingness to play this role.

Building a Bridge Between Solitudes

The Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women's Health offers an opportunity to create a bridge between academic, health, government and community-based organizations to improve women's health. One of the challenges of creating a new model is breaking down the traditional silos or solitudes around each of these areas. The Centre is encouraging a process around women's health that will be greater than the sum of all its separate parts.

The ability to work cross-sectorally and to encourage others to do so is a unique quality which is critical if we are to move beyond our current individual and narrow sectoral approach to research, policy development and decision-making around health. The fact that the

Centre has demonstrated a capacity to bring people together and facilitate successful collaboration with multiple-sectors is seen as an important role and positive accomplishment in relation to impact.

Having the Credibility to Convoke

The MCEWH enjoys a growing public profile throughout the Atlantic. The MCEWH has demonstrated the capacity to “convoke” across sectors and across geography. The ability to do so can be attributed to a certain level of legitimacy and credibility with key health partners. Bringing people together for productive discussion and dialogue can only occur if one is perceived as having the legitimacy and credibility to do so. The *Atlantic Region Policy Fora on Women’s Health and Well Being* organized in each of the four provinces in both 1999 and 2000 were identified as major successes for the Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health. The fact that the MCEWH was able to convoke these events, that they were well-attended by policy makers and grass-roots activists alike in all four provinces and that broad policy discussions around a women’s health agenda occurred, was seen to be an incredible accomplishment. The capacity to work on a regional basis and the MCEWH’s growing credibility and profile in all of the Atlantic provinces were identified as indications of success.

Getting a “Fair Share” of Research Funding

Currently, the Atlantic does not receive a proportionate share of the annual health research funding. In the last six years the four provinces together have received an average of 2.9% of the \$250 million spent annually on health research or about two-thirds less than what would be due based on population share. Of \$90 million in research funds awarded annually through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Atlantic provinces receive only about 4%, or half what would be due based on population share.

At a time when there is growing competition for health research dollars, the trend among funding institutions is to support initiatives involving larger consortium or joint ventures involving multiple partners. Having a national “Centre” which has a regional mandate and presence, is multi-sectoral in scope and has a proven track record across sectors and geography serves as a catalyst for health sector partnerships. The partnerships being fostered by the Centre can enhance the capacity of the Atlantic region to access a larger share of health research dollars.

The region’s ability to compete nationally will depend upon there being the capacity to quickly coordinate and initiate proposals. The Centre’s

infrastructure, secretariate and constituency were identified as assets for the region in this regards. Having developed the capacity to play this role was identified as a success indicator.

Taking a Broader Perspective of Health

One of the MCEWH's mandates is to bring about social change through policy-based, social determinants research in women's health. By supporting research which promotes a health determinants approach, both for improving population health and women's health and for reducing long-term health care costs, the Centre is making a valuable contribution to broadening the focus of traditional health research.

Unfortunately, policy discussions on health issues and the allocation of funding to health continues to be "disease focused" and devoted to the treatment of illness. This has proven to be more costly than investments promoting health and well-being through prevention strategies. As the budgetary crisis in health care continues, policy makers are searching for ways to make strategic investments in health which can result in savings in health care.

Providing informed research on key determinants of health impacting on women's health, can lead to opportunities for policy changes and investments which improve women's health. The Centre's focus and commitment to this type of research allows it to play a leadership role in advancing a broader population health approach that can produce significant savings in later health care costs. The Centre is seen as both making a positive contribution to the body of knowledge as well as legitimizing a determinants approach to looking at health issues. Being able to promote health determinants research and a population health approach and thus a broader perspective to health research than more traditional clinical research was identified as a success. For example, the presentation of *Women's Health in Atlantic Canada: A Statistical Portrait* by Dr. Ronald Coleman at the policy forum was evaluated as successful in giving gender-based and determinants-based research additional affirmation and legitimacy in the public eye.

Promoting a Gender Equity Lens

The fact that the Centre is helping develop tools as well as funding research that looks at how health policies affect women and men differently is another self-identified success indicator. By encouraging gender-based research, the Centre is able to use the research to enhance the sensitivity of the health system to women's health issues, in particular regarding the links between women's health and their social

and economic circumstances. As a successful champion of gender-based research, the Centre is in a position to be able to influence health programs to respond to different gender-based needs and trends, whether for women or men. This can help policy makers be more effective in targeting interventions and programs to respond to the particular needs of both genders.

Including Disadvantaged Women

Although not always easy, it was felt that the Centre has been successful in reaching out to communities not always consulted or included in traditional health research. By supporting research which focuses on women living in disadvantaged circumstances, including women living in poverty, women living in rural areas, Black and care giving women, the Centre is playing an invaluable role in giving voice to women not typically heard in health research or health systems. This has served to affirm and legitimize women's experiences in relationship to their health. Examples of such research include: *The Stories of Women Living with Depression: Their Coping Strategies and Resources*; *Affirming Immigrant Women's Health*; *A Women's Survival Guide to the Poor Economy*; *Black Women's Health Research*; *Off Reserve Aboriginal Women's Health Assessment*.

Capacity-Building and Empowerment

By providing community research awards, the Centre has increased the capacity of community-based organizations to engage in research and policy development on priority women's health issues within their communities. Its ability to reach out and work with community groups to ensure that their experience is not overlooked in planning for women's health was highlighted as a success of the Centre. By providing funding, support and creating networking opportunities, more women's capacity to engage in policy development has been increased. The Centre's commitment to working with and empowering communities has been identified as an indicator of the Centre's success and a significant contribution to the region.

The Centre's support for community-based policy research is contributing to social change and the potential development of a social movement around women's health. Being successful in this work at the local and regional levels contributes to the Centre's national mandate of helping refine a women's health research agenda for Canada.

Helping Leverage Resources for the Region

With strategic, yet sometimes small amounts of seed funding, the Centre has strengthened the capacity of community groups and researchers to leverage additional research or program funding in support of women's health. For example both the *Black Women's Health Network* and the *Care Givers Research Project* have expanded their initial research projects into substantial 2nd phase initiatives with funding leveraged from their initial grants. Additional funding was received from the McConnell Foundation, SSHRC, Status of Women and others. Perhaps the most notable leveraging of funds is reflected in the creation of the Elizabeth May Chair in Women's Health and the Environment as a result to two anonymous donations to the Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women's Health totaling \$1.6 million dedicated to women's health research. In February 2001, the Centre and a key partner, was awarded a \$1.7 million dollar grant for research on caregiving.

Using MCEWH grant money to attract additional funding and generate more research was a concrete indicator of success. The fact that this funding has allowed regional expertise to stay in the Atlantic by creating opportunities for researchers and individuals to be engaged in research locally was also highlighted as a success indicator.

Research/Knowledge Generation

The demand for evidence-based research in order to determine appropriate health policies and defend and direct overall spending remains high. The research and knowledge which has been generated and which can now be used to influence policy was seen as a success. It can now be used to bring about changes. The *Black Women's Health Research: Policy Implications* for example was a small project development initiative which identified health care needs of Black women for the IWK Grace Health Centre's Women's Health Program. This resulted in changes to the service delivery approach of the IWK Grace to better respond to the needs of Black women. These were identified as some of the positive impacts of the Maritime Centre.

Networking a Wealth of Human Potential

The MCEWH has succeeded in developing an Atlantic-wide constituency of over 1500 organizations and individual researchers connected to women's health. The ability to bring together such a wealth of human potential and create opportunities to network regionally was identified as a significant success indicator. The value of being able to link and identify individuals and organizations through an accessible data-base was seen

as an important resource in the region and an indicator of the Centre's success in relation to building a constituency in support of health.

Reaching a Wide Audience with the Message

Another area where the Centre identified success is in relation to the diversity and creativity of means they have adopted to distribute the results of the health research conducted through the Centre. Examples of the Centre's success in getting the word out includes: the "Lunch N' Learn" series; the Atlantic Policy Fora; the Millennium Women's Health Calendar; the MCEWH Website (voted best women's health website by the Canadian Medical Association in 1998) and the trilogy of books recently published as part of the Atlantic Women's Health series. These were all seen as examples of the Centre's success in communicating research results in a wide range of formats and mediums appropriate to diverse audiences.

Concluding Thoughts

The Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women's Health has evolved since its inception in 1996 from a creative idea into a dynamic actor in the health sector in the region. Success indicators reveal that the Centre has, in a relatively short time, achieved some very significant results and had an impact in the region upon several areas pertaining to enhancing women's health and well being. It has taken the challenges of this particular period in health care in the region, and transformed them into opportunities for building new partnerships, strengthening local organizational and research capacity, networking, building a data-base and leveraging new resources for women's health, to name just a few.

The Centre has taken the leadership to convoke a variety of organizations and sectors into common fora for dialogue to address and advance women's health. Its ability to facilitate initiatives and build bridges between these traditionally separate worlds of work is due to the credibility it has established. Most importantly, it has through its example presented people in the region with a new model and way of working which can help to encourage ways of supporting not only women's health, but health overall.