

Dr. Bernice Downey

Indigenous Early Career Women's Heart and Brain Health Chair

Institution: *McMaster University*

Project title: *Indigenous Women and Heart Health: Mending Broken Hearts*

The Health Problem/Issue

There is a gender gap between men and women in health promotion, diagnosis, treatment and research with women falling behind in all areas. For Indigenous women, this inequality is more severe because of many culture-related factors. For example, they experience extreme poverty, poor access to health, education, healthy food and clean water. They also experience a fifty-three percent higher death rate compared to non-Indigenous women in Canada. Also, they are coping with racist government policies such as Residential Schools that continue to have an impact today. Finally, Indigenous women often live in high-stress situations due to their roles of strong leaders in society being changed with the impact of European cultural ways.

Furthermore, health care professionals (HCPs) are generally not prepared to work with Indigenous people. The way that they provide health information to Indigenous women is often not sensitive to these women's cultural needs. Health science programs and courses are lacking necessary information to make sure that HCPs are working with Indigenous populations in a culturally competent way.

The Objectives

Our research program focuses on three main goals— learning from Indigenous women, education for health care providers, and prevention of cardiovascular disease and stroke (CVD/s). The primary goal of this proposed program of research is to learn more about Indigenous women at risk of or living with CVD/s. We hope to understand how Indigenous knowledge or 'ways of knowing' about well-being can assist Indigenous women with the self-management of their CVD/s. We will also educate healthcare practitioners so they are more culturally competent when working with Indigenous women with CVD/s. Finally, we will engage in educational health and well-being workshops with young women to help prevent CVD/s.

The Approach

We will use a strategy called community-based participatory research (CBPR) to carry out the research program. CBPR invites members of the community being researched to share in decision-making and ownership of the research, and in so doing, aims to improve the lives of the participants. We will use this approach with Indigenous women and their health care providers in both on-reserve and non-reserve settings to form strong partnerships for the work.

To gather data for our program, we will start by interviewing Indigenous women with CVD/s as well as HCPs. We will then measure the impact of our education program on cultural safety and self-efficacy both before and after implementing it. Access to traditional information/services as well as relationships between Indigenous women with CVD/s and HCPs will also be measured before and after the program.

Unique Factors

Our project is unique and innovative in three major ways. First, the project will gather new knowledge about Indigenous women view CVD/s. It is expected that what we learn will support Indigenous women's ability to self-manage their CVD/s more effectively. The Indigenous knowledge gathered will also hopefully strengthen their cultural beliefs about the role of women within their families, communities and nations; and contribute to their knowledge and ability to take charge and manage their own journeys of healing.

Secondly, we are addressing a gap for HCPs with the development of our educational training module. It is expected that this research program will educate HCPs about Indigenous and gender-based ways of working with Indigenous women with CVD/s and about communication approaches that may help them become culturally competent.

Finally, this research program directly responds to healing needs expressed by Indigenous communities in the document "Truth and Reconciliation". Specifically, there is a need for healthcare providers in Canada to learn about Indigenous health issues, which our program addresses through the HCP educational component.

How the project is relevant to the objectives of the initiative

This research program will add to our understanding of women's heart health in three ways. We will pay special attention to culture and gender to learn how Indigenous women understand their heart health. We will also test a new culturally safe model of care delivery that will be used by health care practitioners to assess if it increases Indigenous women's motivation and ability to manage their CVD/s. This model will include both Indigenous and Western knowledge. Finally, we will measure if the new model of care enables health care practitioners to form more trusting relationships with Indigenous women.