

## **\$600,000 CIHR Grant Supports Cervical Screening Research Study Focused on Northwestern Ontario First Nations Women**

*Thunder Bay, ON (February 17, 2012)* — Rates of cervical cancer are substantially higher in First Nations women than in other Canadian women. Today, the Thunder Bay Regional Research Institute (TBRRI) announced that the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) has awarded \$600,000 in funding to support and advance research led by Dr. Ingeborg Zehbe, TBRRI Scientist, Associate Professor at NOSM, and Adjunct Professor at Lakehead University.

A successful pilot study conducted on the Fort William First Nation – the first in Ontario – found self-sampling and human papillomavirus (HPV) testing was an embraced screening strategy by the majority of First Nations women participating. Now, CIHR funds will support the expansion of the study to include 1000 women living on-reserve in ten Robinson-Superior First Nations communities.

Dr. Zehbe and her award-winning team of researchers and physician researchers will help determine culturally safe approaches to promote increased participation in cervical cancer screening by *Engaging First Nations Women in Cervical Cancer Screening: Assessing Factors Related to Screening and Uptake of Self-Sampling*.

“This is affirmation,” says TBRHSC Chief of Oncology and Regional Cancer Program Medical Director Dr. Dimitrios Vergidis, “that we are committed to improving the health of all the people we serve. This study will help improve screening tools to decrease the prevalence of cervical cancer through early detection using HPV as a marker and help raise awareness about cervical and other cancers in a significantly under-screened population. Together with scientists like Dr. Zehbe, the Thunder Bay Regional Research Institute is bringing unique patient-centred research to the people of Northwestern Ontario by developing diagnostic tools and treatments that save lives.”

“Our research focuses on First Nations women because they have a 73% higher incidence of cervical cancer compared to women in the rest of Ontario,” says principal investigator Dr. Zehbe, “and First Nations women are twice as likely to die from cervical cancer. We hope this study will increase women’s curiosity and knowledge about screening, not just for cervical cancer, but for other types of cancer that can be screened and detected early, such as breast and colorectal cancer.”

The interdisciplinary study combines the expertise of cancer biologists, virologists, epidemiologists and medical anthropologists from several Canadian universities including University of British Columbia, University of Manitoba, University of Ottawa, and Northern Ontario School of Medicine. The team also

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includes members of TBRI and public health care workers from First Nations communities in the region.

Natalie Paavalo, Dilico's Family Health Team Manager based at Fort William First Nation, was engaged in the first study and says, "We helped facilitate the pilot study and congratulate Dr. Zehbe on this vote of confidence from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research by granting funds to expand the study into more First Nations communities. We value the work of Dr. Zehbe and her team and will continue to work with them to improve cervical cancer screening tools."

The *Engaging First Nations Women in Cervical Cancer Screening* expanded study will determine whether a self-sampling test could become a viable screening strategy for First Nations women who live in rural and remote communities, especially for those with limited access to health care providers and cervical cancer screening education and awareness.

This study recognizes that First Nations communities have a different health care experience. Dr. Marion Maar, a medical anthropologist at the Northern Ontario School of Medicine and a research team member, sees that the participatory nature of the study allows researchers to learn about relevant issues directly from First Nations women and their health care providers. She notes that discussions are already revealing important information related to HPV risk behaviors, protective factors, and culturally safe approaches to cervical cancer prevention in First Nations.

"CIHR's support allows Dr. Zehbe's research team to move forward with innovative approaches that benefit patients and address inequalities in health-related choices accessible to First Nations women," says TBRI Vice President of Research Michael Wood. "TBRI is conducting community-based research right here in Northwestern Ontario that may eventually address global under-screened populations where organized cervical screening programs do not exist."

The Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Foundation has a dedicated Discovery Fund that supports bright scientists like Dr. Zehbe to significantly advance medical research here in Northwestern Ontario and around the world. As Foundation Chair, Brian McKinnon, says, "Generous donations to our Health Sciences Discovery Fund can significantly advance medical research here in Northwestern Ontario, and around the world."

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