

Mother was 'frustrated beyond belief'

Grant to study wait times and develop mental health care programs for kids

By JOHN GILLI
Health Reporter

Months-long waits to receive formal children's mental health services had Stephanie Cooper at her wit's end while her young son's behaviour spun out of control.

"I was frustrated beyond all belief," the Lower Sackville mother said Wednesday.

Her son Owen, 7, was diagnosed with oppositional defiance disorder about two years ago. The disorder causes the boy to consistently act contrary to his parents' wishes to the point that he puts himself in danger.

After breaking down in tears at her family doctor's office, Ms. Cooper was referred to the pilot Family Help program at the IWK Health Centre. She said the telephone support she's received from coach Jillian MacDonald since then has made a big difference.

"Week after week, she was there on the phone, going over every quirky behaviour, every new defiance, every anger-tempting, frustrating, hair-pulling, scream-at-the-top-of-your-lungs . . . moment that I had to go through," she told an audience at the hospital.

They were on hand for the announcement of a \$4-million grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to further the development of such programs and study how they might help reduce the overall waits for children's mental health care.

Ms. Cooper said the program is flexible and accommodating of her family's schedule in a way most formal health services aren't and through it she's

learned how to better manage Owen's behaviour and cope with her own stress.

The long waits Owen's family experienced are common, said Dr. Patrick McGrath, an IWK psychologist and the lead investigator on the new five-year project along with Dr. Charles Cunningham of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont.

"Most children and youth frequently wait extended periods for professional services," he said. "This delay in care can be a year or longer."

That wait can make families feel undervalued by the health-care system and prolong stress that can affect relationships and jobs. A growing child's untreated mental health issues can worsen and will have an impact on their education and social development.

"They start down a pathway and they keep going down that pathway until it's more difficult later on to change it," Dr. McGrath said in an interview.

Dr. Cunningham said earlier research, funded by the same granting agency, found parents of children with mental illness were looking for support services much like those offered by the IWK program. That led to the collaboration with Dr. McGrath.

He said one way the project might cut the waits for children's mental health services is by intervening earlier before problems escalate and diverting some children who would otherwise require more extensive care.

"These are evidence-based programs that are likely to be more helpful than many of the things that people are wait-



ing for," Dr. Cunningham said.

The five-stage project will include two randomized trials, look at ways to use technology to support wait list reduction, and involve parents and front-line **health** workers, policy-makers and hospital officials to ensure that useful initiatives are translated into actual practice.

The project's evidence-based approach and emphasis on cost-effectiveness is vital to the province's effort to build a sustainable **health**-care system, said Linda Smith, executive director of **children's mental health** services for the **Health** Department.

"We must continue to look at creative ways to reach as many young **children** and families as possible and to monitor the effectiveness and the outcome of any intervention," she said.

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RARE REWARD

The recipient of a major grant Wednesday says fewer of his colleagues are able to get the same support from the federal **health** research funding agency.

Dr. Patrick McGrath, vice-president of research at the **Health** Centre and a member of the Canadian Institutes for Health Research governing council, accepted a \$4-million award for his team's work on improving access to **children's** mental health services.

He said while federal funding to the agency has increased year by year, it has not kept pace with the growth of the research community, the demand for support grants and the rising cost of doing research.

"What's happening now is some (applications) that the peer review committees say are outstanding are not being funded," he said. "That means that people have to get laid off . . . and, more importantly, science doesn't get done."

On Tuesday, the Globe and Mail reported that Dr. Alan Bernstein, president of the institutes, had written an open letter to the **health** research community, asking scientists to lobby their MPs to increase funding to the agency.

It's becoming increasingly difficult for young researchers to get their first grants and there's a growing risk that some established researchers may not be able to hold on to their staff without sustained funding, said Dr. Barbara Beckett, assistant director of the agency's Institute of Neurosciences, Mental Health and Addictions, who was on hand for the presentation Wednesday.

"It's very difficult and disheartening for the researchers that were encouraged to come to CIHR, knowing that we were interested in their area," she said.

"If we're going to fully fulfil our promise of broadening the **health** research funding system, we do need a significant increase in funding from the government."