

Comparative Program on Health and Society: Critical Mass for a New Discipline

Grantor: The Lupina Foundation

Grantee: The University of Toronto

Summary: Funding comparative research on health and society

Who could have predicted the 2003 SARS outbreak, and its genesis in Asia? In an eerie coincidence, almost exactly a month before the disease appeared in Toronto, Weizhen Dong, a researcher at the University of Toronto, predicted that something like SARS would develop. She had written a paper on China's health care policy, pinpointing the unequal access of China's urban population to a primarily employment-based health care system. She noted that the steady migration of people from rural to urban areas combined with high levels of unemployment implies that less than 30%, perhaps as few as 10%, of the population is covered under the health care system—roughly 50-100 million dislocated people without health care in China. As cities

like Shanghai grow ever more crowded, she predicted the outbreak of infectious diseases from Chinese cities that could present global health risks. Shortly after her presentation, the first cases of SARS were diagnosed in Toronto.

A fellowship from the Lupina Foundation made Dong's research possible. The Lupina Foundation is a small foundation and a relative newcomer to philanthropy. It was founded in 2000 by Margret Hovanec and her husband, Peter Warrian. The unique name Lupina comes from Warrian's favourite flower, the lupin, to which Hovanec has been added an "a" to emphasize the women's health priority in the Foundation's objectives.

The Foundation is committed to research and innovation related to health and society. This cross-cutting mission is implemented through the funding of research and practice-based activities in three broad areas: health anxiety; access to health services, in particular for women and other under-served populations; and the socioeconomic factors in health risk. "A great deal of money in this country is going into basic health research but very little money, relatively speaking, is going into

the social dimensions of health.” says Janice Gross Stein, Director of the Munk Centre for International Studies, at the University of Toronto, where the Foundation’s program is based. The Lupina Foundation hopes to make a difference in this under-resourced field.

The Foundation’s motivation springs from the founders’ active professional interests. Warrian is an economist and Hovanec is a clinical psychologist. Over the past two centuries, “improvements to the overall health of society have been more related to socioeconomic factors than to medicine,” says Warrian.

Understanding and appreciating the historic and psychosocial factors of health is important” says Hovanec. “This perspective requires researchers to stretch intellectually as well as to be practical and relevant. We want that and we want to be partners in achieving it.”

In 2001, the Foundation’s first initiative was to establish the Comparative Program on Health and Society

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(CPHS) at the Munk Centre. This endowed program supports comparative research on the social dimensions of health risk through fellowships for doctoral candidates, post-doctoral students, faculty and distinguished visitors. Graduate fellowships for health researchers from the humanities and social sciences are relatively rare, and offering several fellowships with the same broad mandate in the same university is unique in Canada. Funding research for graduate students, both doctoral and post-doctoral, is “one of the most neglected areas of higher education granting,” says Warrian.

Together, the Lupina Foundation and Dr. Stein worked to develop the shape of CPHS. The ultimate goal for the Lupina Foundation and the CPHS is “to engage young people at a critical stage in their career so that we see a research community in this country that does continual work in the social dimensions of health risk,” says Stein. “This is quite a footprint to leave.”

During the 2003-2004 academic year, the Program is funding six doctoral students, two post-doctoral students and one distinguished visitor. Most Fellowships are awarded for one year but may be extended to two. Examples of the



research plans of this year's Fellows include understanding the role of scientific evidence in medicine, examining what factors determine drug-pricing policy in Canada and Brazil, and comparing the government policy responses in Canada and Britain to genetically modified food. Funding a minimum of six doctoral students each year, in perpetuity, will build a substantial community of scholars in the area of health and society. The capacity of the program to fund research fellowships "will grow as the money grows," says Stein.

With limited fellowships in the university sector and none mandated to health and society, the selection process is rigorous. Academics from many disciplines throughout the university form a review committee, which screens the numerous applicants to the CPHS program. Once Fellowships have been awarded, the researchers' home base is the Munk Centre for International Studies. In addition to proximity, the program offers numerous other opportunities for the Fellows to interact both socially and intellectually.

All too often, research gathers dust on a shelf somewhere, never generating the exposure required to impact on either policy or practice. To ensure that the Program's research does get the right kinds of exposure, a seminar series offers frequent opportunities for stimulation through presentations of the research of Lupina Fellows, as well as the research of other invited guests. Seminars are targeted deliberately to draw graduate students and faculty from across the universi-

ty, as well as people from the community. To ensure that academic research remains rooted in practice, Warrion ensures that there are relevant practitioners in each audience.

To further diffuse the results of the research, the Lupina Working Paper Series is housed on the CPHS website. This collection of academic papers offers a glimpse into a portion of the work of Lupina Fellows, both past and present. A research paper on Dong's work in Shanghai is posted there. Another paper examines access to home care services in relation to financial resources. A third analyzes the effects on the health of workers of changing workplace conditions due to technology, a global economy and flexible production, and the implications of this for public policy. A "thought" paper connects historical research to ethics, urging society to examine and learn from the past when considering ethical dilemmas, such as new reproductive technologies. The working papers demonstrate both the many different possible approaches to the study of the social determinants of health and the potential impact of this growing body of knowledge on society.

The Lupina Foundation remains very involved with CPHS. “They are not donors who stop at the door,” says Stein. Warrian and Hovanec “go out of their way to facilitate social interaction, the exchange of knowledge, the exchange of information, among all of the Lupina Fellows.” For example, Lupina’s founders host a dinner for new Fellows each year. “It is potentially problematic if you get too involved, but that’s not what they do; they facilitate, they enable and they are a source of ideas.”

Getting together at seminars or over dinners with the Lupina Fellows has been an absolute joy”, says Margret Hovanec. “Watching students from disciplines that rarely interact, get together and be part of discussions full of enthusiasm, energy and collaboration is a funder’s delight”.

Warrian enjoys his new role as a philanthropist. During the early 1990s, he was Chief Economist for the Ontario government. “Compared to trying to expropriate people’s money through the tax system in the morning and redistribute it in the afternoon, I’d sooner make it in the market in the morning and give it away in the afternoon,” he laughs.

Stein attributes the Foundation’s ability to find the appropriate balance between involved and arm’s length to Warrian and Hovanec’s sophisticated understanding of the interconnection between research and policy. They make

suggestions for programming initiatives that are “consistent with the direction of the program.” At the same time, “they are utterly respectful of the independence and autonomy of the university” and understand its boundaries. “They are partners in the best sense of the word. It’s a treat to work with them.”

**For more information visit the Foundation
Web Site: www.lupina.ca**

