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Pain studied from a child's perspective

IWK Health Centre gets new pediatric research lab

By JOHN GILLIS Health Reporter

Monica Brown can't remember spending two straight days of her 17 years without debilitating pain.

"Chronic pain is a part of me, like an arm or a leg," the Lower Sackville girl said at the IWK Health Centre on Friday.

"However, . . . it hides, using a camouflage technique, and makes your internal parts appear to be healthy and normal."

Monica said her pain, not due to any illness or injury, seems beyond her understanding and certainly that of her peers.

"This hospital became my second school, where I've been given a chance to get education into something that has been a part of me forever," she said at the announcement of a new pediatric pain research lab. "Since pain has no language and no sight, we need doctors like the ones I've been blessed with, to give it a voice and a face."

Dr. Christine Chambers, a psychologist whose work in the field is already renowned, said the new facility will help shed new light on something that touches many, but is difficult to understand.

"It really takes more than great ideas to do research that's going to make a difference in children's lives," she said.

"It takes an enthusiastic team of staff and students . . . but it also take a physical space to make the ideas grow and collaborations grow."

The new lab was built with \$438,000 in funding from the Canada Foundation for Innovation, the Nova Scotia Research and Innovation Trust and the IWK.

Dr. Chambers described a number of projects already underway in the facility.

Some of the IWK research looks at the ways parents react to their children's pain and how those responses affect the experience of pain.

The lab has a cold pressor, an ethically-approved way of inducing pain in consenting children by having them put their hands in cold water.

"We can wait around for kids to get a stomach ache and watch them, or we can make pain happen in a controlled way," Dr. Chambers said.

"That gives us a way, using our digital cameras, of really capturing what happens between parents and children."

Earlier research has found that when parents make reassuring comments to their children during painful experiences like blood tests, it actually makes the children feel more pain. Distractions or jokes make the child's experience of pain less.

Dr. Chambers said no one knows why that is.

"We think that maybe it's a signal to the child — if the parent is reassuring, perhaps that's sending a message to the child that the parent is worried," she said.

The new lab is linked by Internet to video equipment in the blood collection lab so that they can film research participants' interactions with their parents and then ask children how their parents' actions made them feel.

"That's just a couple of examples of how having innovative technology, having space to do the research, makes us able to answer questions that we couldn't really answer any other way," Dr. Chambers said.

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