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Date <b>27.07.2007</b>	Circ. <b>108076</b> Page <b>A1</b>	<b>1 / 3</b>

# Science of ouchies gets \$3m

## Health research funds to help **IWK** team study children's pain

By **JOHN GILLIS**  
Health Reporter

On Thursday morning, Dr. Christine Chambers helped her 19-month-old son Curtis after he scraped his knee.

Later in the day, the Halifax psychologist got a \$150,000 grant to study how parental responses to their children's boo-boos affect how their offspring deal with more significant pain later in life.

Dr. Chambers' team, based at the **IWK** Health Centre, was awarded one of 11 program grants from the Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation.

Four students working with Dr. Chambers in related investigations of children's pain also shared in a total of about \$3 million in funding awarded to more than 60 researchers.

Dr. Chambers said her son has helped inspire her work.

"Just like we're teaching him how to talk and teaching him how to walk, we're teaching him how to respond to pain," she said following a news conference in the Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences

Centre's Dickson Building.

She said parents often don't have a lot of information about childhood pain but are eager to learn.

"They know what to do when their child has fever," she said. "They don't know what to do when their child is having pain."

Dr. Chambers' previous work had found that more than 20 per cent of Canadian teenagers experience pain like stomach aches or headaches at least once a week. She's also found strong evidence that parental behaviours like consoling or minimizing ("It's not that bad" or "It will be over soon") can make it more difficult for children to cope with the pain of things like blood tests or vaccinations.

Tactics like distraction and using humour can help.

In her research, Dr. Chambers and her colleagues plan to recruit 200 Nova Scotia children aged one to three and their families and track their



See **PARENTS' / A2**

# Parents' response to boo-boos affects how kids deal with pain

continued from / A1

responses to everyday pains both at visits to the **WXX** and at home. Her three-year study will also include a group of those children while they get routine immunizations.

Dr. Chambers said she has sometimes found it hard to stifle what seemed a natural response when her son has an ouchie.

"I knew that what I was doing was making it worse, but I couldn't stop it," she said.

Dr. Chambers noted that children who suffer from chronic pain can miss a lot of school, tend not to take part in sports and social activities and sometimes develop **depression** or anxiety.

Children with chronic pain also tend to experience chronic pain as adults, and the years-long wait to get into adult pain clinics in Nova Scotia is well-known.

Dr. Chambers said families play an important role in helping children cope.

"If we can find out how we can teach parents to better respond at this early stage of development, when your child is 12 to 18 months and learning so much about the world around them, maybe we can set up a more positive trajectory for painful experiences throughout life," she said.

Her students' work will focus on mothers' responses to pain, how children remember pain, how they develop language to describe pain and how they process information about pain.

Dr. Pat McGrath, vice-president of research at the **WXX** and a co-investigator in Dr. Chambers' main project, told the audience at the announcement that investing in **children's health** research pays off not only through the improved health of children but also financially through the improved productivity and lower health costs.

Supporting young scientists and researchers is a similarly wise move, he said.

"Like investing in mothers and babies, the investment pays off with successful careers for scientists in Nova Scotia," he said. "New discoveries are used to help Nova Scotians be healthier. New businesses are developed in Nova Scotia and new money is brought into Nova Scotia for research."

But members of the research community cautioned that more and more applicants are left empty-handed because government funding to the Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation has not grown, while the number of people seeking funding has more than doubled since 2000.

Only 62 of 215 applicants were successful this year.

"We need to find enhanced ways of supporting the research careers of new scientists," foundation CEO Krista Connell said at the grant announcement. "This is a challenge we're tackling head-on."

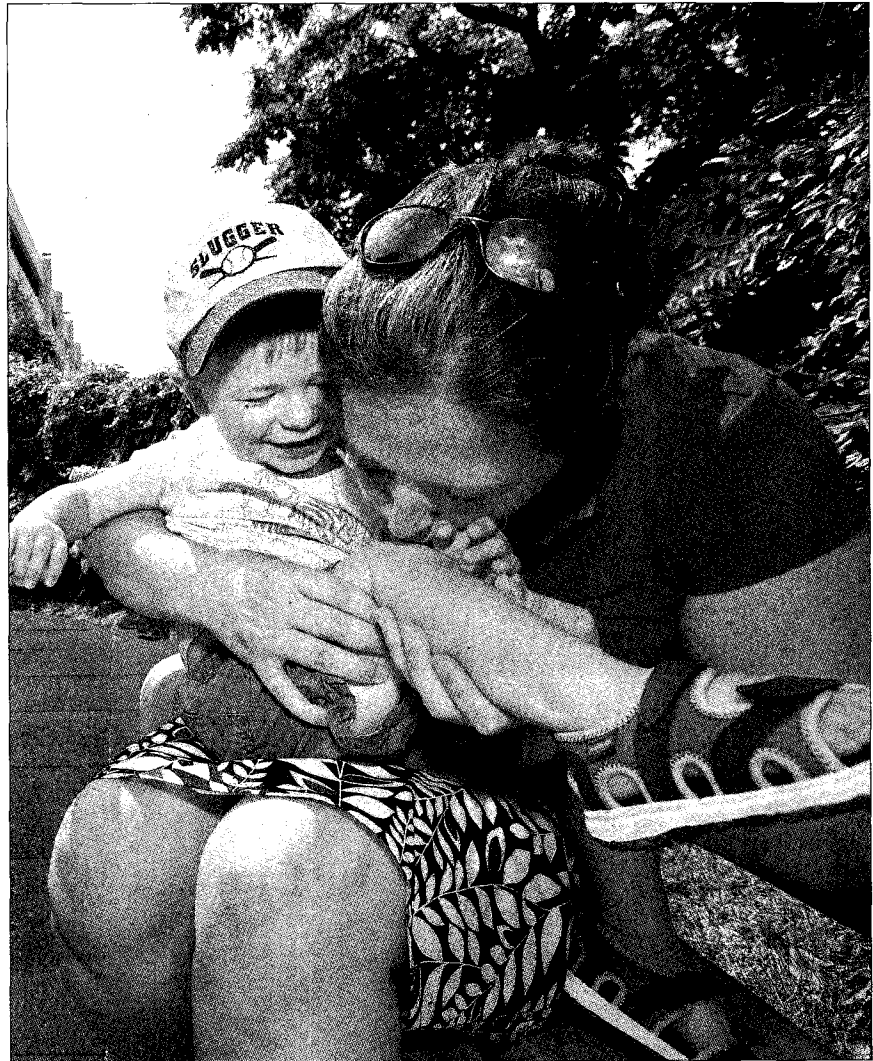
Health Minister Chris d'Entremont acknowledged the province needs to do more to support research through the foundation.

He said he has sought additional funding in previous **health budgets**, but the competition for tight funds in the department has stymied the requests.

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*'I knew that what I was doing was making it worse, but I couldn't stop it.'*

**DR. CHRISTINE CHAMBERS**  
Studies children's pain



**Dr. Christine Chambers kisses the knee of her son Curtis Simms, 19 months, after he suffered a boo-boo on the playground. The Halifax psychologist has received funding to study how parents deal with pain and children.** (ERIC WYNNE / Staff)