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Nearly half of Ontario seniors do not see dentists regularly: study

Poor oral health tied to chronic disease and worse overall health

TORONTO, October 27, 2011 —Forty-five per cent of Ontarians 65 years and older did not see a dentist in the last year, increasing their risk of chronic diseases and a reduced quality of life , a new study by researchers at St. Michael's Hospital, Women's College Hospital and the Institute for Clinical and Evaluative Sciences (ICES) shows.

“Poor oral health can contribute to many serious medical conditions and affect a person's ability to chew and digest food properly, leading to inadequate nutrition,” explains Dr. Arlene Bierman, principal investigator of the study. “With dental services not covered under our universal health-insurance program and many older adults not visiting dentists regularly , the findings suggest we need to rethink the services we provide to help keep seniors healthy as they age.”

According to the researchers, women make up the majority of the older population. They are more likely to have two or more chronic conditions than men, report more disability and chronic pain, and are less likely to be physically active.

“A focus on prevention and health promotion can help older women remain active and independent as they age as too many are physically inactive and do not eat enough fruits and vegetables ,” said Dr. Paula Rochon, study investigator and senior scientist at Women's College Research Institute. “Yet, what we do know is that it's never too late to improve quality of life and health for women, regardless of age. In fact, a focus on strategies to improve health in the older population can help prevent chronic disease and its associated complications.”

The findings are detailed in a report of the POWER (Project for an Ontario Women's Health Evidence-Based Report) Study — a joint study from St. Michael's Hospital and ICES. The study is the first in the province to provide a comprehensive overview of women's health in relation to income, education, ethnicity and geography. Findings can be used by policymakers and health-care providers to improve access, quality and outcomes of care for Ontario women. The Older Woman's Health report examines quality and outcomes of care among older women and men

in home care, long-term care and in the community. The POWER Study was funded by **Echo: Improving Women's Health in Ontario**, an agency of the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.

“Since women comprise the majority of the older population in Ontario, we need to be paying closer attention to the specific care and service needs of older women,” says Pat Campbell, CEO of Echo. “The POWER Study Older Women’s Health report provides key suggestions on how we can begin to do this.”

Findings of the POWER Study released today include:

- About 60 per cent of older women reported that they were physically inactive compared to 48 per cent of men;
- Less than 45 per cent of older adults took steps to improve their health in the previous 12 months;
- Nearly 67 per cent of women ages 80 and older reported functional limitations and more than 1 in 3 low-income women reported their activities were limited by pain;
- Nearly 60 per cent of women admitted to the hospital for heart failure are age 80 and older, and 90 per cent are age 65 and older.
- Many health-care providers have little training in the care of older adults — there are only 1 to 5 geriatricians per 100,000 adults 65 and older in some areas of the province.

Women have different patterns of illness and health-care needs compared to men. According to the researchers, previous generations of women had fewer opportunities and financial resources and less education than women today, and are less likely to pay for supportive care and access to health services that are not publicly funded.

For more information on the POWER Study and its partners, visit www.powerstudy.ca. Other findings from the study will be released later this year.

Dr. Arlene Bierman is a researcher in the Keenan Research Centre at the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute of St. Michael's Hospital, a scientist at ICES and Echo's Ontario Women's Health Council Chair in Women's Health at St. Michael's Hospital and the Lawrence S. Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing, University of Toronto.

Dr. Paula Rochon is the vice-president, research at Women's College Hospital, senior scientist at the Women's College Research Institute and a professor of medicine and health policy management and evaluation at the University of Toronto.