

Early Career Award Winner



Dr. Meghan McMurtry

Written by Natasha Gallant, PhD (Regina)

Dr. Meghan McMurtry, an Associate Professor at the University of Guelph, has devoted her academic career to understanding children's experience of pain. For example, her work on procedural pain and fear has contributed to how the World Health Organization delivers vaccinations — both in terms of recommended pain management and, more recently, in understanding and managing stress-related responses. Ultimately, Dr. McMurtry hopes that her research will encourage the public to understand a biopsychosocial model of pain and health rather than the reductionist biomedical one. Believing in the importance of staying connected to clinical practice, she can also be found at McMaster Children's Hospital, working with children, adolescents, and their families as part of the Chronic Pediatric Pain Program. Most recently, her contributions to the discipline of Health Psychology were recognized with the CPA Health Section Early Career Award.



What drew you to a career in health psychology?

I grew up in a family of healthcare practitioners: My father was a surgeon and my mother was a physiotherapist. I was initially interested in medicine, but I pretty quickly realized that I wanted to talk to patients more than is typical in medicine, so I became a little bit more interested in psychology. When I took introduction to psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University in my first year of undergraduate studies, I literally couldn't believe that people got to study these fascinating things that I got to learn! At that point, I became really passionate about psychology and pursuing psychology instead of medicine. But I was still very interested in medicine, so that's where I became really interested in health psychology because it was a perfect blend of my interests.

What do you think are the most important issues in health psychology today?

Access to health psychology in the more rural and remote areas and facilitated access to health psychology in urban centres is important. We need to really diffuse ourselves across Canada and create integration within multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary services. We also need to work on improved integration with primary health care. Psychology has so much to offer, so part of what we need to work on is continued public engagement. We need to ensure that our voices are heard because I think we have a lot of expertise that we can bring to the challenges that we face as a society.

(cont'd)



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How has health psychology evolved since you began your career?

How it's evolved is a bit tricky because I think it depends on geographic location. There is some increased recognition of health psychology and integration within health care, at least in more urban centres and tertiary care, but I think there's still ways to go within smaller hospitals and health care services. When you're getting outside of major centres, I think it's very different and there's room to grow.



If you could give one piece of advice to someone who wants to start a career in health psychology, like yours, what would it be?

I would say just do it! There are a host of Canadian graduate faculty that are world renowned, so reach out to them. I also think it's really important that, once students graduate, if they don't see the career that they want, that they should know that, over time, they may be able to craft it. Sometimes the job that we would like isn't necessarily available to us at that moment, but it doesn't mean that it can't become available over time.

What does it mean to you to receive the Early Career Award for the Health Psychology Section of the Canadian Psychological Association?

It's a huge honour for me. There are so many talented and productive health psychologists in Canada, so I feel so fortunate to have received this award. I also work a lot within interdisciplinary teams, in terms of both my research and my clinical work, so it's extremely meaningful to me to have recognition from my psychology peers. A given researcher does not act alone, so I would also like to thank all my previous supervisors, mentors, collaborators, and students. It's pretty awesome to be within pediatric pain research in Canada and in the world.

After graduation, if you don't see the career that you want, you may be able to craft it over time.

Sometimes the job that we would like isn't immediately available to us, but it doesn't mean that it can't become available over time.

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