

Local group questions latest immigrant study

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A local multicultural group questions the purpose of a \$1.2- million study that will examine how to provide mental-health services for culture-shocked immigrants.

"These people (new Canadians) are almost research-abused," Myrta Rivera, executive director of the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre, said when asked to comment on the study.

"It's time to stop with the studies and do something."

Rivera said researchers have already examined the outcome of employment, language and housing stresses faced by immigrants, but no action was ever taken on the findings.

"When they're willing to pay for research but reluctant to take action . . . we (agencies) have to be careful we don't become handmaids of the state," she said.

The five-year mental-health study will be co-ordinated by Kitchener's Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, a non-profit organization that does research with community groups and academics.

Rivera said she supports and admires the centre's work on issues faced by immigrants but worries when so much money is pumped into yet another study.

Government should do something about developing and supporting more compassionate mental-health services for all Canadians, not just immigrants, she said.

"Most immigrants are survivors . . . they're strong, and the fittest make it to Canada," Rivera said. "We have to watch out for stereotypes. Yes, immigrants experience more than their share of stress, but it doesn't mean they have a mental-health condition."

Rich Janzen, research director at the centre, agreed concerns are legitimate when no action is taken after subjects are studied and researched.

"But that's not the way we do it . . . we're not just doing research for knowledge production."

Janzen said people from different cultural groups will help do the research on the mental-illness project. And to make sure action is taken on the findings, the centre will have access to civil servants and politicians, he said.

The University of Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University, Kitchener's downtown health clinic and the branches of the Canadian Mental Health Association will participate in the project.

They will join forces with researchers and officials from the University of Toronto, St. Joseph's Hospital and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto.

Janzen said immigrants and refugees face a multitude of stressful demands over a lengthy time, and this can occasionally lead to mental illness.

The study will explore how different cultures have widely varying approaches to mental-health issues and treatment.

"In some cultures the subject is considered taboo, so how does the Canadian health-care worker even bring it up for possible discussion?" Janzen asked.

"There is a growing need in Canada to reconsider traditional approaches to mental-health support in order to better understand and integrate the needs and challenges of a diverse multicultural population."

The study is financed by the Social Sciences Humanities Research Council of Canada and Ontario's Trillium Foundation.

Janzen said details will be provided at a March 30 lunch meeting at the centre's headquarters on the third floor at 73 King St.W.

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