

Innovative research grant looks to boost occupational health and safety research in Canada with The Ralph McGinn Postdoctoral Fellowship.

Health and safety research gets a boost

By Gord Woodward

The new Ralph McGinn Postdoctoral Fellowship award is fostering research into occupational health and safety and work-related disability in B.C. and Canada.

Ralph McGinn, the chair of WorkSafeBC's Board of Directors, was a lifelong advocate and leader in occupational health and safety who passed away in May 2020. His career included five years as WorkSafeBC's president and CEO prior coming out of retirement to rejoin the organization as the Board chair. In honour of McGinn's leadership and commitment to enhancing worker safety, WorkSafeBC established an innovative research grant earlier this year: The Ralph McGinn Postdoctoral Fellowship. This grant supports postdoctoral researchers beginning their careers in occupational health and safety or work disability research.

With this new fellowship, WorkSafeBC is one of only two provincial compensation boards and occupational health and safety (OHS) regulators to offer competitive awards specifically for postdoctoral researchers — this summer, the first award recipients were chosen.

Building future leaders in OHS research

Funding postdoctoral researchers is an opportunity to build research capacity in Canada, as well as support the development of a dynamic and diverse research community studying OHS and work disability, explains Deepani Weerapura, senior manager, Office of Learning, Leading, Sharing at WorkSafeBC.

The funding opportunities for postdoctoral scholars carrying out research specific to OHS in Canada are limited, she adds.

Two researchers have been selected to receive the inaugural Ralph McGinn Postdoctoral Fellowship award: Dr. Sonja Senthana and Dr. Heather Johnston. Their research reflects McGinn's passion for improving health and safety in the workplace and furthering successful rehabilitation for injured workers. Each recipient has been awarded \$50,000 per year for two years to help with their projects.

Each recipient is looking at very different issues — one is examining immigrants' experiences of rehabilitation services; the other is identifying risk factors that certain injuries have in common.

“Overall, our Research Services group funds independent, scientifically valid research that provides insight into real issues faced by workplaces in our province,” explains Weerapura. “Every year, we approve and fund research projects that translate research knowledge into practical workplace applications and aim to solve specific problems for workplaces.”

Studying rehabilitation services

A postdoctoral research fellow at the University of British Columbia's School of Population and Public Health, Dr. Senthana will research the relationship between the experiences of rehabilitation services among immigrants compared to Canadian-born workers. She explains that no studies have examined the impact of these services on return-to-work outcomes and the work disability experience among immigrant workers in B.C., even though immigrants make up almost 28 percent of B.C.'s workforce and are overrepresented in employment prone to work-related injuries and illnesses.

Dr. Senthana's study will take advantage of linkages between the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada Permanent Residents database, demographic information from the Ministry of Health, and claim data from WorkSafeBC to construct a cohort of workers. These workers will have experienced work-related back strain, concussion, connective tissue, or upper- or lower-limb fracture injuries over a specific six-year period. The study will also categorize immigrant workers based on what brought them to Canada — whether they came for family reasons, for a particular job, or as a refugee. Each reason brings different experiences and advantages or disadvantages.

“My research previously has been with workers in vulnerable situations and precarious employment, so I've always been interested in this type of work: looking at where there are inequities,” says Dr. Senthana.

Preliminary research has found that after being injured on the job, immigrant workers, and particularly refugees, generally receive claim benefits for longer than Canadian-born workers do.

“I'd like to understand: What are the reasons for immigrants' longer disability duration. Where are the barriers, and where can we make improvements in programs that WorkSafeBC offers?” she says.

She hopes the research results will eventually inform WorkSafeBC's broader policies and programs.

Studying common injuries

Dr. Johnston's research, meanwhile, will look at the risk factors and hazards in common between work-related psychological injuries and musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs). She'll also explore how workplaces have addressed and can continue to address and mitigate these risks. A certified associate ergonomist, Dr. Johnston studied biomechanics — how the body moves in relation to both internal and external forces — as part of her doctorate in kinesiology and health science. She now holds a postdoctoral fellowship position at the Institute for Work & Health with a focus on MSIs and on measuring human function and behaviour in workplaces.

The importance of this research can be seen by looking at claim rates: At least 40 percent of work-related claims in Canada are associated with MSIs, and in 2020, WorkSafeBC accepted more than 2,200 work-related psychological (mental disorder) injury claims.

“We know MSIs are one of the most prevalent work-related injuries, and psychological injuries are on the rise. The way the pandemic has changed many work environments presents a timely need to understand the similarities and risk factors between physical and psychological injuries,” Dr. Johnston explains. “The hope is that identifying these — the risks, hazards, and mitigating factors — will make it possible to decrease claim and injury rates and translate into safer, healthier work environments.”

Funding research for the future

The two award recipients have research projects examining very different issues, but with a common goal: a safe, injury-free future for all Canadian workers and employers.

“These projects illustrate the kind of realistic research WorkSafeBC supports,” says Weerapura. “The information that comes from these projects can be translated to the real world by employers, workers, policy makers, and other experts.”

The addition of this fellowship award brings WorkSafeBC’s annual research program to \$1.8 million. “Investing in this sort of research helps us create new approaches to preventing and addressing workplace injury and illness and respond to priorities in workers’ compensation,” concludes Weerapura.

David Young, WorkSafeBC’s senior director of Claims Management Services, agrees that research informs prevention, which then affects the claims side of WorkSafeBC.

“We know that prevention is paramount, and we want to support employers to ensure their workers come home safe from their job every day,” he says. “These projects, along with all the research that we do as part of our research program, will help us understand where we may need to make changes and improvements in the future.”

To learn more about WorkSafeBC’s current research funding opportunities visit [worksafebc.com](https://www.worksafebc.com) and search for “research opportunities.” ☺



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