Researcher receives Rising Star Award

BY SEAN MOORE
Research Promotion

"A lot of good things happen when you let other people help decide what you should be researching," said community health science’s Randy Fransoo.

Fransoo is a researcher with the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP) and he recently won a Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Rising Star Award, given annually to five Canadian graduate students or post-doctoral fellows for excellence in the area of health services and policy research and knowledge translation.

"I almost didn’t apply for the Rising Star Award because the very thing I’ve learned here is that it’s not about stars," Fransoo said. "It’s about teamwork."

Fransoo was recognized for his contributions to two projects. The first was a new approach to study the impact of socioeconomic status on educational outcomes.

Grade 12 students in Manitoba have long taken standards tests, and the MCHP team started by looking at results from the 2001/02 school year. The usual way of assessing the social gradient is to compare how well students from low income areas did compared to those from wealthier areas. Like many previous studies, they found that students from low income areas didn’t do as well.

"The big problem with that approach is that kids from low income areas are also more likely to have dropped out or been retained, so they’re not in Grade 12 to write the test. The challenge is — how do you account for those that weren’t even there?"

That’s where their population-based approach comes in.

"It’s the difference between the truth, and the whole truth," Fransoo said. "There’s nothing incorrect about the usual way, but it’s not the full story. The population-based approach followed all children born in 1984 — the kids who should have been in Grade 12 and writing the test that year."

"What we found was that the social gradient in education is much steeper. The real gradient is not about test performance — it’s about staying in school, and staying with your peers year after year," he said.

Fransoo also co-directs The Need to Know team with Patricia Martens, the Director of MCHP. The award-winning team is a leader in knowledge translation.

"One day in 1999 we realized that dissemination was completely wrong-headed, timing-wise. The way to get research results used is to get the people who want to use the results involved before the beginning," he said.

This idea was a cornerstone in the second study Fransoo’s award recognizes.

"After a year’s worth of meetings with partners in government and all areas. The message is you can have implications for those that weren’t even there."

Regional Health Authorities, all parties decided to examine mental health.

The data the team had, however, was not the qualitative sort usually used to study mental health issues.

"Instead, they had administrative data; if a Manitoban used the health care system, they knew when, where and what for (but not, it should be noted, who)."

They learned one quarter of Manitobans age 10 or older have received a diagnosis for a mental illness, and they see doctors and get hospitalized twice as often; but only a portion of that use is for their mental illness. Overall, one in 10 hospitalizations and one in 10 physician visits in Manitoba are for a mental health problem.

"Effective knowledge translation is much more than a publication," Fransoo said. "It requires involving the target audience from the very start. By doing so, you ensure the results are relevant, and more likely to effect change."

Looking at the intricacies of consumerism

BY SEAN MOORE
Research Promotion

"Do these pants make me look fat?" requires a delicate response if you want a kiss at the end of the date, but if you couch your response in lavish flattery you’ll likely get your peck.

If you’re looking to sell pants, however, flattery is a bad approach.

Marketing professor Kelley Main and colleagues at York University have long taken standards tests, and the MCHP team started by looking at results from the 2001/02 school year. The usual way of assessing the social gradient is to compare how well students from low income areas did compared to those from wealthier areas. Like many previous studies, they found that students from low income areas didn’t do as well.

One of their experiments tested consumer responses to flattery during retail transactions. Subjects were flattered either before, during or after the sale and then answered a questionnaire about their experience and how trustworthy they found the clerk.

"What this means is that the usual way, but it’s not the full story. The population-based approach followed all children born in 1984 — the kids who should have been in Grade 12 and writing the test that year.

"What we found was that the social gradient in education is much steeper. The real gradient is not about test performance — it’s about staying in school, and staying with your peers year after year," he said.

"The big problem with that approach is that kids from low income areas didn’t do as well.

"The retail marketplace offers a bewildering array of products, most of which come with their own boldness of their claims so some advertisements proclaiming them to be an "est" — the biggest, the brightest, the strongest or fastest — but such adjectives can be a backstabbing lot."

In the study Main gave participants a bewildering array of products, most of which come with their own advertisements proclaiming them to be an "est" — the biggest, the brightest, the strongest or fastest — but such adjectives can be a backstabbing lot. After completing this phase of the experiment, subjects went to another lab where they read about, tested, and evaluated a pair of headphones.

"What we found was that the greatest levels of distrust carried over to the head phones when that subject had high expectations for the cleaners' performance and then that cleaner failed to work," Main said.

"What this means is that the behaviour of others in the environment can have implications for those that haven’t done anything wrong."
Engaging with the world

Scowcroft balances school work with social responsibility

BY DALE BARBOUR
The Bulletin

Electrical and computer engineering student Jane Scowcroft, set to graduate at next week’s convocation, is a perfect match for the U of M’s Engineers Without Borders team. Living as you could imagine. She was born in Australia and with a father employed by the United Nations toured the world as a youth living in places ranging from India, through Uganda to Columbia before her family settled in Winnipeg and she headed to Balmoral Hall to wrap up her high school education. But when she traveled to Tanzania to work with the Family Alliance for Development and Cooperation she was seeing a different world than the one she had grown up in.

"Having traveled, helped me deal with the culture shock, but there’s a big difference between traveling with the United Nations with a private driver and living life with people who are in poverty. You can’t understand the challenges they face until you’re living on $1 a day."

From Scowcroft’s goal when she was working in Africa was to help the Family Alliance develop local fixes for local challenges and the only way to do that is to come at the challenges knowing exactly what resources people in the community have, or more often than not, don’t have.

"I lived with a family with seven kids, collected water every day, cooked, cleaned, and tried to live a regular life," Scowcroft said.

That engagement with the world is only part of what Scowcroft claims to be her most important educational experience. When the Engineering Without Borders, a student organization that had Scowcroft and other members of the group talking with would-be engineer students in Canada about what the programs can do for them and the world. It is no wonder why Scowcroft has also been involved in the University of Manitoba Student Engineering Society, which also focuses on outreach and education, and a range of other outreach projects including the Centennial Homecoming Committee and the Engineering Endowment Fund Advisory Council.

"It’s a reminder that the reason I do these things is not for the reward," Scowcroft said. "It’s almost impossible to do engineering by yourself. You need to have a group of people to work with you."

As for graduating, Scowcroft doesn’t have a three-minute speech prepared quite yet.

"That engagement with the world is only part of what Scowcroft claims to be her most important educational experience."