



NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Joint project evaluates digital mental health solution in Ontario Big White Wall offers peer support to help reduce feelings of isolation

TORONTO, August 8, 2016 – The Ontario Telemedicine Network (OTN) is teaming up with the Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Sciences (Ontario Shores), Lakeridge Health and Women's College Hospital to test the benefit of an online support community for people feeling anxious or depressed, or having trouble coping with other mental health-related issues.

Mental illness affects one in five people every year – 2.8 million people in Ontario – according to a 2010 study by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Wait lists for treatment are lengthy and access to mental health care is limited by specialist availability, geography and cost. Counselling or psychotherapy is one of the most cited unmet needs among Canadians.

Big White Wall (BWW) – bigwhitewall.com – provides a round-the-clock online peer support community where members can share experiences and express themselves in words and images, helping participants feel less socially isolated. There is also a library of articles, tips and support courses including cognitive behaviour therapy accessible online. Trained counsellors are available 24/7 to offer support and keep the community safe. Members can access the safe community anonymously via computer, tablet or smartphone.

The BWW pilot, which will include approximately 1,000 patients ages 16 and up, will complement the mental health care they are receiving or waiting to receive. The pilot is funded by Canada Health Infoway and the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.

The pilot supports Canada's mental health strategy Changing Directions, Changing Lives, which recommends the 'use of technology to foster collaboration, increase access to services, and engage people in managing their mental health problems' and 'recognizing peer support as an essential component of mental health services.'

"We're hoping to see this resource help people more confidently manage their challenges and be less likely to require crisis support, inpatient care or intensive face-to-face counselling," says OTN CEO Dr. Ed Brown. "We believe technology-assisted self-management can improve access to care, particularly for those on wait lists, while improving quality of life for patients."

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“Big White Wall serves as a great example of how innovation in digital health supports patient-centred care,” says Michael Green, President and CEO, Canada Health Infoway. “Infoway is proud to have invested in this initiative, which is designed to provide much needed support to patients living with mental illness.”

Big White Wall originates in the United Kingdom and also operates in the U.S. and New Zealand. This is the first time it will be available in Canada. BWW is completely anonymous and members create a username that does not identify them in any way, encouraging them to open up. In fact, almost half of all people using Big White Wall reported sharing an issue troubling them for the first time on the site.

“We’re moving into an exciting time for mental health services,” says Tom McHugh, Lakeridge Health’s Interim President and CEO. “We’re reducing stigma and growing new programs and services to meet the needs of more families across Durham Region. This project is a great example of that. Although there is more to do, this partnership is a step in the right direction.”

“We are thrilled to embark upon this journey of providing continued exemplary care in non-traditional ways,” says Karim Mamdani, President and CEO at Ontario Shores. “Working with partners who are equally committed to advancing mental health care will help build capacity and increase access to service for those who need us most. This pilot project is consistent with our partnership approach and our commitment to innovation in service to those suffering from a mental illness.”

“Making mental health and well-being support available online 24/7 can help people reach out and ensure that they get help when and where they need it,” says BWW’s Interim CEO, Tina Trenkler. “We are so proud and excited to be working with OTN and partners to launch Big White Wall for the first time in Canada.”

The goal of the pilot is to see decreases in: levels of anxiety, levels of depression, number of calls to mental health crisis lines, emergency department visits for mental health-related issues and inpatient admissions to hospital related to mental health issues. The program also aims to improve the ability of participants to manage symptoms over the course of the pilot project.

The Women’s College Hospital Institute for Health System Solutions and Virtual Care (WIHV) Health will evaluate the results of the pilot, which will run until March 2017.

“The type of access issues we see happening in mental health care here in Ontario can be tackled through virtual care solutions,” says Dr. Trevor Jamieson, who leads the Virtual Care strategy at WIHV. “However it is essential to have an objective evaluation in place first, before these tools are used more widely across our health system.”

From WIHV’s standpoint, Dr. Jamieson says, “we look at some of the most promising new technologies in virtual care to make sure they are safe and effective, that they focus on patient needs and are of the highest value to patients, clinicians and Ontario’s healthcare system.”

About OTN

A world leader in telemedicine, OTN helps Ontarians get more out of the health care system by bridging the distance of time and geography to bring more patients the care they need, where and when they need it. Using innovative technology, OTN streamlines the healthcare process, while also expanding the way knowledge is shared and how the medical community interacts with each other and with patients. An independent, not-for-profit organization, OTN is funded by the Government of Ontario and Canada Health Infoway.

For more information visit www.otn.ca. To arrange an interview with Dr. Ed Brown, please contact Gillian Wansbrough, 416-446-4110 Ext. 4004 or gwansbrough@otn.ca.

About Canada Health Infoway

Infoway helps to improve the health of Canadians by working with partners to accelerate the development, adoption and effective use of digital health across Canada. Through our investments, we help deliver better quality and access to care and more efficient delivery of health services for patients and clinicians. Infoway is an independent, not-for-profit organization funded by the federal government.

For more information, visit www.infoway-inforoute.ca or contact Dan Strasbourg, 416-595-3424 or dstrasbourg@infoway-inforoute.ca

About Big White Wall

Big White Wall (BWW) is a multi-award winning digital mental health service, active in the UK, New Zealand and the US. It delivers personalised support and recovery pathways to improve mental health and related conditions via a safe and engaging collaborative platform of peers, professionals and evidence-based digital partners. For more information visit www.bigwhitewall.com or email theteam@bigwhitewall.com.

About Lakeridge Health

Lakeridge Health is one of Ontario's largest community hospitals, serving people across Durham Region and beyond. Our dedicated team of health care professionals give their all every day to keep improving the quality of care delivered, drive down wait times, and improve results. We have four hospital sites and three Emergency Rooms and many services our community rely upon including a leading regional cancer centre, diabetes management, dialysis, adult and children's mental health services, and a newly renovated Women's and Children's program.

For more information, please contact Lindsay Cochrane, Communications Specialist, licochrane@lakeridgehealth.on.ca or 905-576-8711 Ext. 4317.

About Ontario Shores

Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Sciences (Ontario Shores) is a leader in mental health care, providing a range of specialized assessments and treatment services for people living with complex mental illness. Patients benefit from a recovery-oriented environment of care, built on compassion, inspiration and hope. Ontario Shores engages in research, education and advocacy initiatives to advance the mental health care system.

For more information, contact Darryl Mathers, Communications Officer, mathersd@ontarioshores.ca or 905-430-4055 Ext. 6583.

About Women's College Hospital

For more than 100 years Women's College Hospital (WCH) has been developing revolutionary advances in healthcare. Today, WCH is a world leader in the health of women and Canada's leading, academic ambulatory hospital. A champion of equitable access, WCH advocates for the health of all women from diverse cultures and backgrounds and ensures their needs are reflected in the care they receive. It focuses on delivering innovative solutions that address Canada's most pressing issues related to population health, patient experience and system costs.

The WCH Institute for Health System Solutions and Virtual Care (WIHV) is developing new, scalable models of care that deliver improved outcomes for patients and sustainable solutions for the health system as a whole. For the latest on cutting edge research advancing health system solutions, follow [@wchwhv](https://twitter.com/wchwhv) on Twitter.

For more information, please contact Jennifer Lee, Senior Communications Specialist, WIHV, 416-323-6400, Ext. 3218 or Jennifer.Lee@wchospital.ca.

Attachment: Mental Health Backgrounder