Sandy Rao – University of Calgary

Project: *Perceptions of Access Models that Enhance Mental Health and Addictions System Utilization in Young Adults with Mood Disorders.*

Biography

Sandy Rao formerly held the role of Director of Mental Health & Addictions at Ontario Health overseeing the strategy, planning, funding and evaluation of mental health and addictions programs and services for approximately 5 million Ontarians by the end of her tenure. Before leaving Ontario to pursue her PhD in the Faculty of Social Work as an Eyes High scholar, she was appointed to setting up Ontario's first Centre of Excellence for Mental Health & Addictions and had the distinct privilege of leading the COVID-19 Mental Health and Addictions strategy for the Central Region when the pandemic first began. She also held the role as guest Mental Health Expert for CTV, was a Preceptor for the University of Toronto's IMAGINE clinic, and a member of the Health Care Providers Against Poverty.

Sandy continues to practice as a Registered Social Worker and Registered Psychotherapist licensed in both Ontario and Alberta. She has been a clinician for over a decade in the hospital, community and primary care sectors. Sandy received her Bachelor of Science degree from McGill University. Upon graduating she worked in research at McMaster University and the Population Research Institute.

Sandy continued her academic career and pursued a Master's in Social Work at the University of Toronto where she specialized in Mental Health and Health. A lifelong learner, Sandy has since studied at the Rotman School of Business, Harvard University and has been certified in Community Engagement (IAP2), Indigenous Cultural Safety, Lean Six Sigma Black Belt and User Experience Design.

Project Summary

Mood and anxiety disorders are the most prevalent mental illnesses in Canada, affecting over 4 million Canadians.[1,2,5] The highest rate of mood disorders, and the highest risk for suicide, is among young adults 20 to 29 years of age.[1,2,5] Not only an individual issue, the economic burden of mental illness in Canada is estimated at $51 billion dollars per year.[1,10] In addition to the stigmatic and structural barriers to access there are more nuanced issues at the clinical level.[1,2,5,7,10] Canadians with mood disorders are disadvantaged in traditional health systems as all voluntary points of access are predicated on personal motivation or agency; and the same symptoms that warrant a diagnosis for a mood disorder interfere with those functions that are necessary to gain access to health care.[5,7,9] The result is a fragmented, costly, system not designed for, or by, young adults with mood disorders (YAMD).

The proposed patient-oriented mixed-methods research study will aim to 1) Obtain data on YAMD's perceptions of access models, 2) Evaluate these models against the domains of an ideal mental health and addictions (MHA) system[1,2,7,8,] 3) Effectively disseminate knowledge about access to key stakeholders and health systems, and 4) Develop recommendations for policy and practice changes to enhance models of access for YAMD. Access challenges are a mainstay issue. Despite much discussion on the topic, perceptions of access models from YAMD has not been investigated.[10] The proposed study aims to address MHA system burdens which until now has had a compounding and iatrogenic effect on YAMD.[5,7,9]