

# Presentation to the 2019 Statutory Review Committee – Workers' Compensation System

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## Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to present our recommendation for an increased role in research in the compensation system including:

- improved, transparent, sustained research funding programs
- a more prominent role for evidence-based, contextualized research in OHS decision-making processes
- implementing research and knowledge exchange systems for OHS, and
- developing greater research and professional capacity in this province for this province

We will be making the following points:

- SafetyNet: who we are and what we do
- How we do OHS research
- Why OHS research is important to work disability prevention
- Recommendations

## SafetyNet: who we are and what we do

- As an official research centre of Memorial University, the SafetyNet Centre for Occupational Health & Safety Research is Eastern Canada's only university-based research centre dedicated to supporting OHS research. Our mandate includes:
  - generating new multi-disciplinary research in OHS relevant to the province and its compensation system
  - identifying recent OHS research done elsewhere, synthesizing its findings, and contextualizing them for this province's workplaces and stakeholders
  - providing education and training opportunities for students, researchers, and interested members of the community
  - mobilizing OHS research findings from Memorial and other places through public seminars, research forums, and targeted communications activities, and
  - enhancing OHS capacity at Memorial University and in the province
- Over the last 20 years, SafetyNet and affiliate researchers and community partners have been successful in all these domains by (among others):
  - leading, or participating in, over 200 local, national and international collaborations in OHS research and knowledge mobilization activities
  - partnering with 46 other universities and 113 organizational partners
  - successfully competing for over \$8 million in grant and contract funding
- Most recently, SafetyNet has led the development of a new interdisciplinary Master's program in Occupational Health and Safety at Memorial, the first in Atlantic Canada and only the fourth in the country
- We are speaking not only on behalf of our research centre but also of the community of Memorial's OHS researchers and the wide range of community partners who have contributed to our research and benefited from it

### How we do OHS research

- Our work is multi-disciplinary and involves teams from a variety of faculties and approaches. We formulate our research questions through consultations with our stakeholders and community partners, in a truly participatory approach
- We lead multi-province teams on a variety of key issues of great importance to this province's workplaces, employers, employees and other stakeholders, for example:
  - asthma in shellfish workers

- the health impacts of mining and milling asbestos
- the prevention of occupational disease
- the OHS challenges faced by geographically mobile workers
- We have established ourselves as the 'go-to' research partner in Atlantic Canada for national research teams seeking to include our region, our researchers, and our issues. Examples include multiple collaborations with the Institute for Work and Health in Ontario on occupational disease and on contextualized knowledge translation in OHS as well as collaborations with the Université du Québec à Montréal and the University of Sherbrooke on knowledge transfer
- We contribute to the growth of knowledge in OHS within the province through capacity building of trainees in our research programs including through the new Master's Program in OHS, now in its third year
- The results from our research translate not only in research publications but also have contributed directly to resources that can be used by the OHS community, thus increasing the reach, use, and uptake of best evidence in OHS decision-making

## Why OHS research is important to work disability prevention

### 1) OHS research is important

- Decision making in workplaces, economic sectors, and policy forums needs to be informed by research-based evidence
- This evidence needs to be of the highest quality and to be up to date
- Research comes in a variety of forms - basic, applied, primary, synthesized

### 2) Applied research is particularly important for decision making by governments, regulators, employers, and employees to:

- identify issues requiring action
- scan the horizon for the best research studies and the best practices in Canada and elsewhere
- review and assess the best available knowledge on key questions
- evaluate performance of policies and practices

### 3) Context is essential

- The health and safety challenges faced by this province's workers and workplaces are in many ways distinctive and under-researched
- Findings based on generic research done in, and for, other jurisdictions may not work well here
- Findings and recommendations that are context-sensitive are more likely to be taken up here and more likely to work
- Designing original research projects that are shaped to fit the needs and capacities of this province is most readily done by researchers based here
- The same is true for work that takes research done elsewhere and adapts it to fit the NL context: researchers based here and connected to stakeholders here are best able to do this

### 4) OHS researchers face many challenges within the Canadian and Provincial context

- Access to Canada's national research funding agencies has been limited for OHS researchers
  - OHS research does not have an obvious home in any of the three national research councils; including the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Science and Engineering Research Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
  - When they *do* fund OHS research, it is rarely focused on NL or on Atlantic Canada
- WorkplaceNL has provided increased funding for research, especially in recent years, but research has tended to receive little attention in its reports, documents, and website. More readily available information on key aspects of the research process would be useful to both researchers and other OHS stakeholders, including:
  - an accounting of potential, available, and allocated WorkplaceNL research funds
  - clarity on the adjudication process and feedback to unsuccessful applicants from the review panel on how to strengthen possible resubmissions
  - summaries of research findings and outputs (including reports) and resulting knowledge mobilization activities that can be accessed by OHS researchers and stakeholders on WorkplaceNL's website

This information would help both OHS researchers and stakeholders in accessing results from previous projects and in identifying high-priority research opportunities that are of interest to key OHS decision-makers in the province.

#### **5. How WorkplaceNL could continue to grow its support of OHS research in NL**

- The current model outlined in WorkplaceNL's Research Initiatives program supporting short-duration (e.g., 12-18 month, up to \$150,000) projects is good. However, only providing funding for short-term projects presents challenges for OHS researchers
  - Some research activities cannot be completed in 12 to 18-month period
  - Misalignment of timelines between researchers and community partners
  - Insufficient time to build capacity of OHS trainees
- Building a funding mechanism for longer duration (3-4 year) research activities (e.g., large scale multidisciplinary projects) would be valuable. This would create the opportunity for WorkplaceNL to create:
  - create flexibility in the allowable budgets for different research activities
  - distinct funding programs for differentially scaled research efforts (i.e., for pilot studies, public engagement activities, small scale contextualized research, larger scale multidisciplinary research and evidence synthesis projects)
- The Commission, the province's OHS stakeholders and the province's OHS researchers could benefit from a more formal and multidisciplinary engagement with a priority to ensure high quality actionable research is conducted to promote and protect the health and safety of NL's workers.

Consider funding an independent applied OHS research institution or centre within the province like the numerous centres in Ontario or Quebec

## Recommendations

The Commission should consider the following ways of enhancing the role and impact of research in its activities and of using its funding:

- ❖ Giving more prominence in its policy making processes and in its communications activities to research and research-based evidence
  - ❖ Making the communications about its research activities and its research funding programs more visible, more transparent, and more comprehensive (how much funding, to what projects, to whom)
  - ❖ Seeking to build a better partnership with Memorial University and with SafetyNet including consulting them on the design of its research funding and knowledge exchange activities
  - ❖ Expanding the size, scope, and variety of its research funding to facilitate greater partnerships with OHS researchers:
    - providing a mixture of larger and smaller grants and of commissioned as well as research-driven projects
    - providing longer-term funding, including funding for graduate students and post-doctoral fellows for whom short-term grants are not optimal
    - in addition to funding individual projects, funding multi-year programs of research as well as a university-based research unit that can pursue multiple questions, properly fund and train highly qualified personnel, and provide ongoing horizon scanning, primary research, and knowledge synthesis for WorkplaceNL and its key OHS stakeholders.
  - ❖ Supporting Memorial University in its efforts to develop increased capacity in OHS research through the funding of new academic positions and the training of more graduate students and post-doctoral fellows.
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